Family Ties

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Family Ties

by Wafflesssss

Summary

At ages 15, 12, and 9, Dick, Jason, and Tim had found a home in Wayne Manor. Never mind the fact that Dick was the only one Bruce had legally adopted, and never mind that Tim and Jason's parents had no idea where they spent their time(not that either set cared). The three were brothers, and Bruce was maybe sort of like a dad, and it was perfect.

And then Wayne Manor goes up in flames, and only the kids make it out.

Four years later, Dick is angry, Jason is a vigilante, and Tim is a ghost. When Dick has an encounter with the Red Hood, it sets off a chain of events that could bring all three brothers back together. But, for some reason, Batman has taken an interest in each of them. Why?

Chapter 1: Prologue

Even on the massive lawn, far back from the house, heat seared Dick's skin. Fire consumed Wayne Manor greedily, devouring Dick's second chance at a good life.

On his right side, Tim clutched Dick's hand. His hair was fluffed into a tangled mess from sleep. At his other side, Jason clutched a handful of his pajamas, too prideful to accept the hand Dick offered. Face stubbornly blank, he stared into the fire. Was Dick the only one having to hold back tears?

Tim clearly wasn't processing what was happening. Nine years old and already a genius, he'd been staying up later and later into the night working on passion projects and schoolwork alike. He watched the destruction before him through sleepy eyes, uncomprehending. Secretly, Dick was glad. If Tim was awake enough, he would realize the truth.

There had been four people in the house that night.

Bruce was not outside.

"Dick," Jason said, voice hoarse from smoke, "What do we do?"

Oh god. Dick was in charge now, wasn't he? At fifteen, he was the oldest of the three. He would need to take care of Jason and Tim, make sure they ended up okay—

Except Dick was the only one of them who had legally been Bruce's child. The other two, though there was no doubt in Dick's mind that they were brothers, had parents. Birth parents, too.

Shitty excuses for parents who have no business having kids , his mind hissed, but there was a stinging heat beginning to register on Dick's right side and he had to think.

Jason was watching him with a level expression. For a twelve year old, he was shockingly mature at times. Dick almost wanted to turn to him, ask him what to do. But that wasn't fair to him. This was Dick's job now.

"I… There'll be firefighters here soon. And police. We're going to talk to them, and do what they say."

Jason's eyes widened. "We can't do that. My parents don't know I'm here. And if I come back with a police escort…"

Too late, the pieces clicked in Dick's mind. Jason could only stay over at the Manor because his parents didn't care enough to notice him leave. But if the police showed up, and his mom was high or his dad was engaging in his… hobbies, and Jay was the one who brought them…

Jason's breath was coming quickly now. He stared at the ground, breaths coming ragged and panicked. Letting go of Tim's hand, Dick knelt in front of Jason, putting his hands on both his shoulders.

"I'm not gonna let that happen, okay, Jay?" Sirens began to wail, firetrucks and ambulances finally entering earshot. Not the time. Dick's mind was whirring, putting pieces together, and the picture he saw was not pleasant for any of them.

There was no family for Dick to go to. No more sympathetic billionaires, for sure. He would go into the system. Fear rolled through his gut, but he forced it back. There was no time.

Jason would have to go back to his family. Neither of them had phones. Jason couldn't afford one, and Bruce hadn't gotten him to accept one as a gift, and Dick's was burning with the rest of his home. Tim would be returned to his house, that lonely mansion next door, with no escape from the empty halls. He'd be brought out by his parents for galas like the one Dick had met him at, then left to rot in solitude while they traveled the world without sparing their son a second thought.

Drawing in a shuddering breath, Dick reached out for Tim. Gently, he tugged him around so he and Jason were both in front of him. Tim was considerably more awake now. Fear reflected in his eyes next to the flames.

"Listen. Here's what we're gonna do. Jason—" Dick squeezed his eyes shut for a long moment, hating himself for his next words "—you're gonna go home. You'll have to walk back, hide when the trucks pass. If they see you they'll take you back and talk to your parents."

Jason didn't look happy, but he nodded. He and Dick could at least agree that it was best for him to avoid the police.

"Tim, you'll stay with me until they get here. Your parents know you stay with us, they won't be mad. The police can take you home and

wait until Ms. Mac or someone comes to stay with you."

Tim nodded, a furrow appearing between his brows. "What about you?"

Why do you always have to care about everyone else, Baby Bird? Dick sighed. "They'll probably put me in the system."

Jason's head jerked up. "Dick, you can't—"

"I can't do anything to stop it." Dick cut him off, hand tightening on his shoulder. " *We* can't do anything, Jay."

"Yes we can!" Jason grabbed Dick's wrist and started to pull them towards the road. He didn't make much progress. Dick was taller and bigger than him, both because of age and the difference in nutrition. Since he'd been friends with the Waynes, Jason had been steadily putting on weight, but he was still small for his age and just a little too skinny to be normal. "I've got some supplies in my room. We can take it and run. We'll leave Gotham. They'll give up looking for us eventually."

"Jay. Jay—Jason!" Dick grabbed Jason's hand and forced him to stop. He turned back with eyes full of angry tears, not one spilling over. The sirens were getting louder. "We can't leave. Tim and I are too high profile. Too many people would look for us. And at least this way we'll know we all have roofs over our heads."

"Yeah! Great roofs! Wonderful, safe, loving roofs!" Jason shrieked, nearing hysterics. Tim pressed himself further into Dick's side, and Dick automatically put an arm around him. "We won't be able to stay in touch! We'll be alone!"

"I know that, Jay." Dick grabbed Jason's hand with his free one and squeezed it. Jason met his eyes, chest heaving. "I know. But I'll know where you are. Timmy, you'll be at Drake Manor. And you'll be with your parents, Jay. You can survive it. I know you can."

Jason shook his head silently, tears still not falling. In Dick's chest, something cracked. They didn't have much longer.

"I'll be eighteen in three years. I'll come find you then. You just need to stay where you are, so I can find you. Okay?"

Tim nodded. He was used to doing difficult things, Dick knew. Difficult like staying alone in a house for months at a time, before he

met Dick and became a part of their patchwork family. It was a betrayal, abandoning him like this.

Jason met his eyes stoically. “I don’t want to lose you,” he croaked.

Dick pulled both of them in for a hug, one hand cupping Tim’s head and the other rubbing circles on Jason’s back. “I know,” he murmured. “I don’t want to lose you either. But we have to do this.”

They stayed like that until the sirens mixed with the sound of engines. Then Jason broke away, took a few backwards steps, and pivoted to run towards the woods that lined the drive up to Wayne Manor. Dick watched his brother until the trees swallowed him whole. Then he swallowed back the sob in his throat and turned to Tim, giving him his best imitation of a smile. “We need to go speak to the police now, Timmy, alright?”

Tim nodded, and the two of them set off across the lawn to wait for the cavalry.

The following events passed just as Dick predicted. EMT’s treated a burn on Dick’s side, then took him and Tim to the police station. They answered the questions they were asked, then two officers left to take Tim home. Before he left, Tim gave Dick one more fierce hug. It was quick, and when Tim pulled back, he wore an expression Dick knew well. It was the one he wore at public events where he wanted people to be nice and not ask too many personal questions. Then he was gone.

A burned body was recovered from the Manor, and Dick was officially alone again.

He went to a boy’s home, where he stayed until he was placed with a foster family. It was the first of many, and Dick learned the tricks to surviving every one of them. Eventually, he stopped smiling.

At Drake Manor, Tim grew up, and his time with the Waynes became a comforting memory. He took to following the Batman through the city, though that was an excuse he made up. If he admitted to himself that he was looking for his brothers, the hope might kill him. But he was staying put. Dick would come back for him eventually.

Jason went home. He survived. He stayed put. But then his father got arrested, and he found his mother dead with a needle in her arm.

Jason would not go into the system, so he ran away. He knew he was losing his chance for Dick to find him, but he knew it wouldn't have happened anyway. That fire had destroyed them already. They were just too scared to admit it.

Three brothers grew up alone, and Batman watched over each one, never allowing himself to feel regret.

Chapter 2: Lonely Bird, Lost His Family - Four Years Later

Chapter Notes

> Right, I've decided a schedule. I'll update when I have a new chapter, cause my brain apparently cannot sit on it for one singular week. That being said, the longest I'm going to go without updating will be a week, and I'm aiming to finish this fic before the next school year starts.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: mild violence, mentioned/ implied character death, mentions of alcohol abuse(hypothetical)
>
> Hope y'all enjoy!

It didn't matter what season it was. Nights in Gotham were cold. On the rooftops, with nothing to block the wind, it was freezing. Wind buffeted Dick's face, forcing him to narrow his eyes as he judged the space before him.

The roof stretched out a short distance ahead, ending a few yards before the next began. In between was a long drop to the concrete below, where the muggers and dealers waited for whoever was stupid enough to pass by carelessly. Traveling by rooftop was by far safer for those with the skills, which meant Dick had them to himself.

Well, himself and Batman, but he didn't count. Dick had never caught more than a passing glimpse of the vigilante. He never stopped in Crime Alley, not unless there was something happening he'd deemed worthy of his attention. Apparently, stopping people from getting robbed or beaten up was below the Bat's paygrade.

How much of a difference does he really think he makes? Dick glowered and kicked a pebble on the ground. For all the media preaching his might and skill, Batman had never been more than a drop in the bucket. The still-stinging cut on Dick's lip from an incident last week attested to that.

Besides, if Batman was really as observant as they say, he should've noticed the kid he shared the roofs with. Dick laughed to himself and he dropped into something resembling a runner's crouch(hey, he was an acrobat, not a track star).

For a moment, Dick just let himself breathe. He focused on the way the night air froze his longs, imagining ice crystals growing in his chest. He listened to—or felt, there was a thin line there when it came to assessing your body—his heart beating, steady and strong.

He blew out a long breath and began to run.

The distance between the rooftops wasn't far compared to others, and Dick cleared it easily with a jump. Landing on his feet, he kept going, leaping from one roof to the next, gathering momentum. He let out a whoop as he flipped through a particularly long jump, relishing the feeling of weightlessness at its peak.

Up here, high enough that the noise in Crime Alley faded to a distant hum, was the one place Dick found refuge. Up here, he didn't have to watch for people waiting to hurt him. Up here, even if they appeared, they were in *his* territory.

It was like he was a bird, flying above the city. And when Dick flew, he didn't need anyone else.

Ever since that night at Wayne Manor, Dick had been passed through house after house. He was just another kid in Gotham's foster system. And in the foster system, he had learned that a lot of people liked maintaining control. In several houses, he'd had to keep to a strict schedule designed by the parents. When he got a phone, they always ended up looking through it. Dick quickly learned that privacy wasn't a right. It was a privilege, one foster parents held onto with iron fists.

But, as Dick found out, privacy was also a necessity. It wasn't that he wanted to keep secrets. It was that he wasn't allowed, forced to display every aspect of himself and his life to these people whose only claim to him was a signature on paper. It was like he'd been put in a glass box with nowhere to hide, and it grated on him.

So Dick learned to collect secrets. He snuck out at night and ran across rooftops. He kissed girls, and when he learned he also liked kissing boys, he kept that a secret too. At school, kids collected comics in plastic sleeves and enamel pins in jars. Dick collected secrets, clutched tight to his chest. At night, when he sat with his knees tucked to his chest on rusted fire escapes, he whispered them to himself and remembered that they didn't know everything. There were things about him that no adults could pretend to understand. They couldn't taint his memories with their pity. He could keep the pain close, an ache all his own.

Maybe it was self-destructive to hoard his hurt. But knowing it didn't quell the vindictive thrill every time someone pretended to know what Dick was going through. He pressed his lips together against a bitter grin and thought, *I know you don't know everything. I know you don't know* me.

The air in his lungs had turned painful, the cold air scratching his throat as he panted. Though he wanted anything else, Dick slowed down, chest heaving. This roof was familiar to him. There was a space between the roof access door and the AC unit where younger-him had liked to sit, either watching the stars or looking out for Batman.

As he came to a stop, it was as though Dick's thoughts caught up to him. They crowded his mind, weighing him down with *memories* and *what if's* and *why's* ?

Dick searched his brain for a happy memory, something to focus on so he could keep going and not hurl himself off this roof tonight. As usual, he settled on his brothers.

"Tim and Jason kept pestering me to teach them gymnastics." Dick closed his eyes briefly, letting himself leave the present moment for a better past. "Jason wanted to be able to do the quadruple flip like me. Tim wanted to learn how to use a trapeze. He kept asking me to teach him to fly."

A warm feeling spread through his chest as he remembered afternoons spent in the Manor's gym under Alfred's watchful eye. Dick had spotted both Tim and Jason through flips and taught them to use their momentum to swing around a bar. He never had quite gotten up the courage to let them try a trapeze. Every time he did, his mind came a bit too close to That Night. But his brothers had understood. They never pushed, and anyway, it wasn't like there wasn't more to teach them.

Dick was forced out of his reverie by a loud shout from above him. Two people crashed onto his roof, rolling dangerously close to the edge before they stopped.

One was a man, dressed in dark clothes and wearing a ski mask over his face. The other was tall, wearing black armor and a red helmet, two guns strapped to his thighs.

Dick had heard about this guy. He called himself…Red something. *Red Knight? Red Shadow?* He was clearly a vigilante, and he'd taken up residence in Crime Alley. Unlike the Bat, he was helping with

everything, from fighting off muggers to stopping drug deals in their tracks.

From what Dick had heard, the guy was also a lot deadlier than the Bat, but he found himself not caring. At least the guy gave a shit.

In the time it took the vigilante to recover from the fall, his quarry had scrambled to his feet, running towards the roof access door.

Unfortunately for him, his path took him straight towards Dick. Dick wasn't happy about the intrusion on his rooftop.

In two quick steps, he was close enough to punch the guy in the nose. Blood spurted and the man crumpled with a yell, cupping his nose as he curled up on the ground. *Jesus* , Dick thought, *Didn't think it was that easy to beat a criminal in Gotham* . He looked back at the other man, who'd finally regained his footing.

The man in the helmet was staring at him; or at least, he seemed to be. His eyes were obscured by white lenses. It was creepy enough like that, but the guy also wasn't moving at all. He'd frozen, practically a statue.

Dick took half a step back, and the vigilante snapped out of whatever trance he'd been in.

"Thanks for the help." His voice was rough and tinny, probably affected by a voice modulator. "I didn't need it, though."

Dick scoffed. "Sure you didn't." In his opinion, this guy should've been able to get up quicker. He also should've been able to not be completely entranced by Dick's ability to throw a punch. "What'd he do?"

The man made a noise of disdain. "Asshole tried to rob a girl a few blocks away. I was just helping out."

"Oh." Now Dick was considering stomping on the man's face. He decided against it. "Hey, what's your name?"

"Red Hood."

Dick paused, raising a brow at the guy. "That's a helmet."

"And?"

"And…whatever." Dick shoved his hands in his pockets. Now that the

adrenaline from the surprise was wearing off, he really just wanted to go home. He hadn't wanted to talk to anybody tonight, and he hadn't wanted to get involved in dealing with a criminal either. For tonight, at least, his roof had been ruined.

But the guy didn't move. He just stood there, watching Dick. As time dragged on, Dick's skin began to crawl with unease. Something was up, and the most concerning thing was that this guy's stare didn't make Dick feel unsafe. It just made him feel like he was missing something.

"Is there something on my face?" he asked, taking a few steps back. The criminal was still on the ground between them, and Dick nodded towards him. "Don't you have other things to do?"

The Red Hood shook his head quickly, looking at the ground. "Yeah. I do." He stepped forward, pulling a pair of handcuffs from his belt.

Dick took that as his cue to leave. He turned on his heel and took off back the way he came, pushing off into a flip that would land him on the next roof. Behind him, Red Hood yelled something along the lines of, "What the fuck was that, you fucking bendy straw?", but he didn't stop. He wasn't interested in talking anymore. Now, he really just wanted to sleep.

When he dragged himself back into his apartment, through the window because he didn't want to go down to the stairs, Dick rested his elbows on the counter and put his head in his hands.

By all rights, nothing should be wrong right now. A vigilante had crash-landed on his roof and they'd had a short, meaningless conversation. Was it strange? Yeah. Was it earth-shattering? No. This was Gotham. People met vigilantes all the time. There was Batgirl, for a time, who would stop and talk to people on occasion, and at least a few people had been the target of a few passing words from Batman, even if they were *don't do drugs* or *stop pissing people off when they have guns* .

But right now, there were feelings swirling in Dick's gut, a ball of confusion and questioning and something *else* that weighed him down until he felt nauseous.

There had been something familiar about that man. The way he stood, the way his head tilted just slightly to the right, the almost

imperceptive jerk backwards when Dick had insulted him…All of it stirred some memory in him, infuriatingly fuzzy and impossible to grasp.

Now that he thought about it, Dick remembered what he'd heard about the Red Hood, from snatches of conversation in the street, or small talk with customers at his job.

They said the Red Hood had gathered all the crime lords in the city together and demanded they work for him.

They said he wanted a cut of their profits, and to stop dealing to kids.

They said that when the bosses refused, he gave them the heads of their lieutenants in a duffel bag.

Dick knew a lot of people, but he'd never been friends with a murderer. That, he was certain of. Though, if he found out that one of his friends had killed someone, he doubted that he would kick them out of his life without hearing them out.

Like most people, Dick had started his path through life with a very simple set of morals, including the very easy *killing is wrong* . Now, though, he couldn't help but wonder. Not if killing was wrong, but if sometimes killing was *worth it* .

Not when his bullies beat him unconscious, or when he broke a mugger's nose in the alley behind city hall. Those weren't worth it.

But maybe, in a warehouse in Ethiopia two years ago, it would have been.

Groaning, Dick pushed himself off the counter and headed for the cabinet above the sink. *Fuck* .

He did his best not to let himself think about Jason, and most nights, he succeeded. He could remember the good parts, the crooked smile and the snarky comments. It was the headlines, and the funeral, and the pictures of his broken face that brought the nightmares on full force.

Dick supposed he could have turned to drinking, as he retrieved the pill bottle and a glass of water. He'd heard great things from old classmates about the way it numbed your mind. Sometimes he found himself outside a liquor shop, clutching a fake ID so hard the edges cut into his palm. What always stopped him was Jason. Jason would

have hated if Dick shut out the world. He never would have forgiven Dick if he made himself forget. Worse, the stubborn kid probably would have found some way to blame it on himself.

In his nineteen years of life, Dick had never touched a drop of alcohol or any other mind altering substance, and it was going to stay that way. He put the melatonin on his tongue and took a long drink of water, bowing his head once he'd swallowed. It wouldn't stop the nightmares, but it'd fight the insomnia for a little while. He only needed enough sleep to get by without fainting(it happened once. Only once!).

He took the water with him to his bedroom. The apartment only had two rooms, plus the bathroom, which creaked when you turned on the taps and never had hot water. His bed was a secondhand mattress he'd got and pushed up against the wall, because the money was better spent on food and taxes. When Bruce died, Dick had gotten a small inheritance, in the form of ten thousand dollars every year starting when he turned eighteen. Everything else had gone to Alfred, and Dick didn't begrudge him a cent.

When it was all fresh and Alfred got back from his vacation(earlier than anticipated, because when he heard the news he packed his bags and reached the airport within the hour), he tried to see Dick. But Dick, upset and angry and wallowing in the unfairness of it all, turned him away. That had been a mistake. Dick could see that now. But back then it had just seemed logical. Lose his father, lose his brothers…may as well lose everyone.

Dick stared at the ceiling for a long time that night, waiting for the melatonin to kick in and let him slip away into sleep. Maybe tonight he wouldn't wake up from the nightmare. Maybe it would run its course and leave him to a few more hours of precious unconsciousness. It was a vain thought, but Dick had to hope.

After all, he thought, a bitter smile twisting his lips, it wasn't as though hope had let him down before, right?

Chapter 3: Little Bird, Became a Ghost

Chapter Notes

> I was listening to the La La Land soundtrack while writing this. The moods did not match. If you want the moods to match, I suggest Ghosting by Mother Mother.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: murder, violence, drugs, mentions of ableism, very minimal implied mentioned past alcohol abuse

Tim hadn't slept in two days. That wasn't uncommon for him, not since he'd been friends with the Wayne's and Alfred had enforced bedtimes. Insomnia had always plagued him, but over the years he'd given up on laying in bed and waiting for sleep that never came. Instead, he started to push himself to stay awake, testing how long he could go before sheer exhaustion overpowered his will. In Tim's opinion, sleep was just a little too useless. He had more important things to do.

'Things' like chasing a glorified furry through the city with a camera every night. For all the praise the Batman got on his perception, Tim really thought he'd have been caught by now.

But, no. He'd been following Gotham's Dark Knight for the better part of four years, and Batman had never noticed.

Maybe if Tim was someone else, things would be different. But Tim had learned long ago that he wasn't as visible as other people. He didn't mind it. It made it easier for him to do what he wanted, without the media ever paying too much attention to him. As long as he performed well when his parents dragged him out to galas and work functions, Tim had full control of his life.

The fact that he used this full control to run around the city taking pictures of Batman wasn't important. It was just something to fill the time.

Tim darted up a fire escape a few roofs over from the one Batman had just grappled to. He knew this section of buildings tended to have a lot of structures and AC units on top of them, which he took advantage of to stay out of sight.

Four years of keeping up with the Batman had given Tim a slim, wiry build. He was light on his feet and good at dodging obstacles, be they on the ground or in the air(batarangs ricocheted sometimes). He leapt the gaps between rooftops with practiced ease and kept right on going. There was something interesting happening tonight.

Batman stopped at a warehouse in Crime Alley. Tim slowed down a few rooftops away. He waited until the black cape whipped around a corner into the warehouse before creeping closer, lowering himself to a fire escape and hopping across the gap onto the warehouse's catwalk, accessible through a large hole where the wall had collapsed.

The Bat himself was invisible, gone into the shadows he knew so well. Tim didn't bother looking for him right now. Camera secure in both hands, he got on his stomach and wriggled forwards until he could see what was going on below him.

Eight people, all wearing cheap face masks and dark clothing, stood around an unmarked crate. The distance between them suggested some kind of deal was going down. Two members of each group were particularly beefy. Guns were visibly holstered at their sides, and they stood a little back from where the others were conversing.

One, a woman with brown hair mostly tucked under a cap, seemed to be the supplier. She lifted up the lid of the crate. Tim risked sticking his head out a little further to see the contents in the dim moonlight.

The crate was filled with teddy bears. The buyer, a skinny man with pasty skin and unfortunate taste in scarves, picked one up. He turned it over and pulled out a knife. Tim froze, but the woman simply watched while the man cut the bear open. Stuffing fell from the incision as he reached inside and pulled out a small white brick.

Drugs, then. Tim wrinkled his nose, but lifted his camera. A good picture might be useful in the case, if he could leave it someplace for Batman to find. He'd had to get a mirrorless camera to avoid giving away his position when the shutter went off, and it didn't do great in low light environments. It'd have to work, though. Besides, best not to make any picture of illegal happenings look too professional. This way, Batman might see it as some random person who stumbled on the deal and wanted to anonymously contribute.

He pressed the button on the camera *one, two, three* times, making sure to get as clear an image as possible of everyone's faces. Now

might be a good time to back out. When the Batman swooped in, those bodyguards would be shooting anything that moved.

Tim began to ease himself backwards, checking with his toes to make sure the catwalk wouldn't drop off behind him. Carefully, slowly, he pushed himself to his feet, exhaling only when the catwalk didn't creak. No one below looked any the wiser, and so Tim went for the window.

He was halfway through the first step when a gunshot exploded from beneath him. Tim clamped his mouth shut on a yelp, biting his tongue on accident. The metallic taste of blood made him want to choke, but he crouched back down and forced the thought to the back of his mind, taking in the new scene before him.

The skinny man was on the ground, blood pooling beneath his head. All four guards had their guns out, aiming at a man. Faint light glinted off the red helmet covering his head. He held two guns, one leveled at the woman's head, the other aimed towards one of the lieutenants.

"Now, I thought the news had gotten out, but apparently not." The newcomer's voice was rough, but the unmistakable youth in it pulled Tim up short. The kid was older than him, judging by his height and build, but his voice was higher than one could expect of a grown man. As far as Tim could tell, this guy was a teenager.

Most people would say that a teenager shouldn't be carrying guns like extensions of his arms, or speaking to drug dealers with the sort of calm that promised danger. Then again, Tim was technically a teenager at thirteen, and he doubted anyone would approve of his extracurriculars.

"News? I haven't heard any news." The woman was smirking, but her eyes had darted to the corpse of her former partner. She was putting on a front.

"Yeah. I control the drug trade in this city now." The kid dipped his head just barely in a mocking bow. "Red Hood, at your service. Unfortunately, no one informed me of this little get together, so I'm afraid you'll need to pack it up now."

Irritation flashed across the woman's face. "Look, *kid* , I came here to make a deal. I'm not leaving unless I'm paid."

"Oh. I'm terribly sorry, I must have misunderstood you. By all means, I'd be happy to make a deal." Hood's expression was invisible behind

his helmet, and maybe that was why only Tim realized what was about to happen.

The woman relaxed. Clearly, she thought she'd won. The second shot went off just as she was opening her mouth. This time, Tim got to watch as the bullet passed clean through her head and she crumpled, limbs splayed at odd angles.

The Red Hood fired off six more in quick succession; the lieutenants collapsed, while each guard took the shot in their dominant shoulder.

In movies Tim had seen, the kids watching in the corner covered their mouths. Tears slipped silently down their cheeks while the killer walked out, leaving them undiscovered but paralyzed in fear. For his part, Tim didn't really feel anything. He didn't feel much at all these days, but he really thought watching four people die might have stirred his sympathy. Apparently not.

To the guards, Red Hood said, "I assume you work for someone. Take your shipment back and tell them that if they want to deal in Gotham, they've gotta deal with me. Next time I'll send it with your heads attached."

He watched the men struggle to one-handedly move the crate back outside in silence, one gun still out and pointed idly at the floor. Once they were gone, he returned it to its holster, turning to leave. As he faced the door, however, the Red Hood froze.

"Was wondering when you'd show up," he said.

Tim stuck his head out once more, searching for any glimpse of dark fabric. He was rewarded when Batman stepped into the light.

For a moment, Tim wondered why he hadn't stepped in while Hood was shooting. The Bat was staunchly against murder and Hood had just comitted four. On top of that, he wasn't attacking Hood now, either.

"You shouldn't have done that." Batman's voice was empty of the threatening menace he usually wielded. Fear was his best weapon. In front of this kid, though, that had dropped away into wariness. There was anger there, tight and controlled, but it wasn't a tirade. He sounded like he was testing the waters, getting a sense of Red Hood's mood.

Red Hood responded by tilting his head slightly, one hand drifting

towards his gun. “Gonna do something about it?” A challenge, and an arrogant one at that. There was no way Batman wouldn’t attack now.

But the Bat stayed still. You’re a child,” he said instead. Hood took half a step back, tensing up. “You don’t have to do this.”

Hood scoffed. “You think I’m delusional? I know what I’m doing, old man, and I’m not gonna stop. You can either let me be or take me out.” He drew a gun, aiming at Batman’s chest. “And I’m not going without a fight.”

“I’m not going to kill you.” Batman took a step forwards; the Red Hood held his ground and removed the safety. “Whatever put you on this path, it’s not worth it. This isn’t the right way to protect Gotham, Hood. If you put down your guns, I can help you. I can show you how to fight without killing, how to save people. I can teach you to achieve your goals the right way.”

“Hm.” The Red Hood tapped his chin in exaggerated thoughtfulness. “Well, when you put it like *that* …I still don’t care. Your methods aren’t as useful as you think, old man, and if you stopped lying to yourself you’d see that. Don’t act like you know anything about me and my goals. At least I can see the city for what it is.”

With that, he threw something at the ground. Smoke exploded around him and Batman, obscuring the warehouse floor in a thick cloud. Silence choked the air. Tim held his breath, both because he didn’t know if the smoke contained toxins and because it felt wrong to make a sound.

When the smoke cleared, both vigilantes were gone. Tim allowed himself to breathe again, pushing to his feet.

Definitely enough excitement for one night.

Tim biked back to Bristol on the near deserted road. The only other people who used this particular route would have been the Waynes, and, well…he saw what had happened to them first hand.

Distantly, in the back of his mind, Tim remembered what it was like to have a Family, capital F. A family that actually spent time together, that ordered pizza and watched movies and roughhoused in the living room. Not people who had a child and seemed to lose all interest.

Tim couldn't blame his parents, really. He wasn't a particularly interesting or useful kid. He just kind of existed, a ghost, half visible in the background. He'd never made an impact, and how were his parents, the renowned Jack and Janet Drake, expected to deal with a son who didn't measure up?

It wasn't the worst life, haunting Drake Manor. Tim had everything he could ever need or want, including ample funds to do with as he pleased. He did his best to be helpful, cleaning when he could and solving cases for the police(they didn't know about that. He'd been sending evidence anonymously under the pseudonym John Blake).

He'd tried to keep an eye on Dick, too. But when three years had passed and Dick didn't come for him, he realized that he failed to make an impact on him, too. And as for Jason…

He tidied up the headstone and left fresh flowers every week.

All the security footage in the house was set on a loop, exempting the ones Tim had set up that sent their footage directly to his laptop. As far as his parents knew, he left for school at six a.m. sharp every weekday and came home at four, staying out an extra two hours on Wednesdays and Fridays for assorted activities. In reality, Tim was free to enter his house through the front door at the reasonable hour of four thirty in the morning.

Maybe he should get a cat, he mused as he walked up the stairs. His footsteps echoed just a little too loudly in the empty space. His parents would never notice. When they visited, he could just keep it in a spare room. Plenty of them were big enough to be comfortable.

Tim dismissed the idea as quickly as it had formed. He'd never be able to keep track of a cat in the Manor. It wasn't worth it.

His room was in its usual state of disrepair. The gray bed clothes were messy and unmade, his weighted blanket bunched up to the side. At least twenty different stim toys were scattered in various places, waiting to be picked up. His desk was full of unorganized writing utensils and stacks of journals. He made sure not to leave any food lying around, but that was the extent of his housekeeping abilities when it came to his space.

Sitting cross legged on the bed, Tim tugged his laptop towards him. He shrugged off his black jacket in favor of a dark blue hoodie. Dick had given it to him when he was seven, and it was still too big for him now. On the front, a design of three acrobats in the middle of a

trapeze performance was traced in black ink. *The Flying Graysons!* had been written on the front pocket in similar writing.

Tim removed the memory card from his computer and began uploading the night's pictures to his hard drive. He'd stopped using film last year in favor of efficient storage.

While he waited, Tim went to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

The Drake's kitchen somehow felt like a liminal space. It was too spotless, too clean everywhere but the battered coffee maker. Tim never bothered to cook anymore. It was rare that he even used the microwave. The cabinets didn't have enough cutlery and utensils in them for their size, and there was an even smaller quantity of groceries. After all, why fill a professional sized fridge when the only one there to eat was a scrawny teenager?

Tim had been in charge of ordering groceries for years now, and he hadn't changed his list in years. His parents always complained about him being a picky eater he was, but Tim couldn't help it. He just had very specific personal requirements for what he ate. He'd never tried to force other people to change what they were eating for him. If there wasn't anything he could bring himself to eat, he simply didn't. But his parents got worried about accusations of neglect, so they decided he was simply difficult.

Getting to live on his own sometimes felt like a blessing when it came to things like that. Tim had learned to notice every little thing about himself that wasn't deemed 'normal' through his parents nitpicking. It wasn't normal to hate bright lights. It wasn't normal to wear socks inside out. It wasn't normal to vehemently refuse when they wanted him to change his haircut, becoming so worked up that he had a panic attack in the barber's chair.

They'd given up eventually and just let him do what he wanted, which was fine with Tim. He poured the coffee into his favorite mug(white and speckled with green polka-dots) and returned to his room. On his way out of the kitchen, he paused, just for a moment, by the glass cabinet in the hall. He moved on with a little jerk of his head.

The pictures had finished downloading. Tim couldn't edit any of the pictures from the deal, since he wanted to send those to the police, but there was one he was keeping for himself.

He clicked the file open and uploaded it to photoshop.

Like most editing sessions, Tim lost track of his surroundings and let his focus tunnel into the task at hand. The sky outside slowly lightened to pink, then blue, and the coffee cup emptied until finally, Tim sat back, eyes smarting from so long staring at the screen. His neck was stiff from hunching over the laptop for so long, but Tim could feel a grin on his face as he looked down at the photo.

Red Hood stood silhouetted in the moonlight coming through the collapsed ceiling. Facing him from the shadows was Batman. The vigilante's cape curved around his feet, exposing the batarangs on his utility belt. Red Hood's white lenses gleamed as he aimed the gun at Batman's chest, head still cocked slightly to the right.

Self-critical as it was, Tim had to admit he'd done a good job. The photo was gorgeous. The joy of a job well done would have been great to fall asleep to, wrapped in his weighted blanket while the birds sang outside.

But, Tim still wasn't tired.

Chapter 4: Lonely Bird, Lost in Grief

Chapter Notes

> This one is pain. I wanted to start giving each chapter a song to go with it, but honestly I don't know a great one that could encompass this entire chapter. I might make a playlist. For now, though, the two that come closest would be Runs in the Family by Amanda Palmer or Sorry by Halsey(if you remove the romantic subtext).
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: spiraling thoughts

Everything was terrible. The baseball cap on Dick's head was just a smidge too tight, his hands were greasy to the point of being uncomfortable, and the sound of small children having temper tantrums rang in his ears.

"Hi, welcome to Batburger, what can I get for you?" He mustered half a smile for the woman in front of him. She looked at least as tired as he was, sporting massive eye bags and holding hands with a toddler on either side. Honestly, she looked one bad thing away from breaking down. Dick sympathized, however, in his case, if something went wrong he might just put his fist through a wall and get fired.

"Can I get two kids meals with burgers, the two doesn't matter.

"Would you like fries?"

"I want fries!" Both the kids piped up in high pitched voices. Their mother nodded, and Dick put it in the order.

"Anything else?"

"The biggest coffee you have."

"Got it. Do you want anything in that?"

"No, thanks." Dick privately saluted this woman, clearly too tired to know what she was doing anymore, because who the hell didn't at least put sugar in their coffee? As essential as it was for running on the fumes of sleep, Dick wouldn't touch the stuff without at least two sugar packets.

"$12.65." The woman passed him her card, and Dick made quick

work of finishing the transaction. “It’ll be right over there when it’s done. Have a good day.”

“Thank you,” the woman said, and corralled her children over to where everyone else was waiting. Dick tossed the receipt he had been about to offer her in the trashcan beneath the counter.

Outside, the streetlights had long since turned on. Every Thursday Dick had the closing shift at Batburger, which meant he got to walk home in the dark, in Crime Alley, in Gotham.

Lucky him.

On top of that, Gotham was a nocturnal city. Any shift after dark was guaranteed to be busy, requiring Dick to pretend he gave a shit with little to no breaks. Thankfully, no one was immediately behind the lady he’d just served, so he gave himself ten seconds to lean on the counter and sigh.

“Uh.” *Fucking shit holy mother of fuck shitting goddamn ass fucker motherfucking no* . “Hello?”

Dick’s head shot up, dismay sinking his gut at the sight of the Red Hood on the other side of the counter. He’d really hoped that the night on the roof two days ago would have been a one time thing.

“Oh. You,” he managed to get out, passing off his shock as boredom. Hood took that half a step back, cocking his head to the right.

“ *You* ,” he mimicked, pitching his voice up an octave. “Jesus, you don’t have to be so upset to see me. I didn’t know you worked here, I just wanted a burger. And, on that note—you work at *Batburger* ?” Hood’s voice was incredulous, and Dick immediately went on the defensive, crossing his arms with a glare.

“Yeah. I work here. Why, is it not up to your standards?” Hood jerked back like Dick had slapped him.

“No! That’s not what I meant. Just—I thought…”

Dick’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“Nothing. Nevermind.” Sadness tinged Hood’s voice, even through the modulator. Concern began leaching into Dick’s emotional storm, alongside the anger and the stress and that *fucking familiarity* , which only got stronger the longer he looked at the guy. He didn’t have time

to feel bad for some random vigilante. He had enough shit to deal with.

“What do you want?” Dick asked. The emotion had rushed out of his voice, turning it flat and exhausted.

“Rude,” Hood muttered, but his head tilted up towards the menu. “I’ll have two double bacon cheeseburgers, a large fry, aannnnnddd…a large chocolate milkshake.”

Dick’s eyebrows lifted. “Anything else?”

“A large iced coffee would be great.”

“Someone’s hungry.”

“You try running around a city fighting people and see how tired you get.”

Dick snorted. “I’m good. Not worth it, anyway.”

Hood straightened up, tensing. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dick paused. He hadn’t really meant to say that last part aloud. “It’s nothing against you, man. I just don’t think there’s any way to fix this city. Batman’s been around for what, thirteen years? There’s still drugs, there’s still traffickers, and our government is a joke. That’s not even mentioning the police.”

“Exactly.” Hood pointed at Dick like he’d just ruined his own argument. “This city is shit, but at least we’re doing something.”

“None of it lasts, though. You arrest one dealer, three more appear. The courts can’t keep anyone locked up because of the corruption. Arkham is basically a vacation home for villains at this point. Aren’t you tired of trying so hard only for it to get erased the next day?”

“Someone told me that it didn’t matter what impact you made on people. They said that as long as there are people to give others hope, then the battle was worth fighting.”

Dick froze.

He’d been twelve. Jason was nine. He’d showed up at Wayne Manor in the early hours of the morning while it was still dark, face puffy with tears.

Dick had been sneaking downstairs for a snack when he saw him. He'd just been sitting on the floor with his knees tucked to his chest, arms wrapped around his too-skinny frame.

"Jay? What's wrong?" Dick sat down on the floor next to Jason, holding his arms out to offer a hug. Jason scooted away a little. When he was angry, Jason closed himself off from everyone. It had always caused Dick more distress than the others, because his reaction to hard emotions was always to cling to his family tighter. But he knew what he had to do. He lowered his arms and got ready to listen.

Jason looked at him, face set in anger, even as another tear fell. "Why doesn't Batman do anything helpful?"

Ever since he'd lost his parents, Dick had watched the caped crusader with stars in his eyes. To him, Batman was the only one who could get justice for his parents' murders. He'd been so angry for so long. He'd even tried sneaking out to look for Zucco himself, once he'd learned his identity.

But Bruce had pulled him back. He sat silently as Dick yelled and screamed, unleashing every awful word he knew(being from the circus, he knew quite a lot), anything he thought would make Bruce hurt like he did.

When he was too exhausted to scream anymore, Bruce opened his arms. Only when he was hugging his adoptive father did Dick remember: Bruce lost his parents too. He had been hurt like Dick did. He still was.

"I'm sorry," he said into Bruce's shoulder, trying to hide his tears by pressing his face into Bruce's shirt.

Bruce just hugged him tighter. "I forgive you," he said. "I know you're angry, Dick. But you've got to let the right people handle this. They know what they're doing."

"The police in this city are worthless."

"I wasn't talking about them." Dick had pulled back to glance at Bruce in confusion. "The Batman is looking for the person who took your parents, Dick. The police here may not help give them justice, but he will. You just need to have hope."

Two weeks later, Anthony Zucco was brought in, and Dick knew Bruce was right.

He scooted around, tilting his head so he was looking Jason in the eye. "Jay, I know you're hurting. But Batman is doing things. He might not be

there to stop every mugging or—or save every kid, but he's still trying. He's taken more dealers off the streets since he appeared than the police have in twenty years."

"Are you sure? Cause there doesn't seem to be a shortage to me." Jason hugged his knees tighter and hid his face in them.

Oh. So that was the problem . *Dick resisted the urge to hug his little brother and tried again. "I know. I know it's hard. You need someone to step in and help, and it's really easy to blame a random dude dressed as a bat for not stepping up."*

Despite himself, Jason snorted.

"But even if Batman isn't helping people directly, he's still helping them. You know how?"

Jason peeked out to give Dick a one-eyed glare. He hated when people asked blatantly leading questions. Still he indulged him. "How?"

"He gives them hope. Every time he goes out, people see him, and they know he's trying. He might be the only one fighting a losing battle. But as long as fighting gives the people around him hope, the battle is still worth fighting. Without hope, we've got nothing."

Jason lifted his head. "Oh," he said, voice small, as another tear slipped down his cheek. Neither of them said anything else. They sat there, and eventually Jason fell asleep, his head drooping onto Jason's shoulder. Dick ended up passing out, too, and they only woke up when Alfred found them later that morning.

Dick shoved the memory down, opening a box in the back of his mind and stuffing the memory of Jason inside before sealing it with a lock. Frowning, he totalled Hood's order just to avoid his eyes.

"Whoever said that was an idiot." As a kid, the Batman was such an untouchable figure, so easy to believe in. A man who never seemed to lose had stepped up to protect Gotham and the people in it. It was all so simple to a child's star filled eyes.

But Dick had gotten older, and he'd learned that life wasn't simple. It wore you down and pulled the rug out from under you, again and again and again until it was a struggle just getting to your feet. Families didn't stay together. Masked men couldn't fix everything.

And brothers didn't come back from the dead.

"Hope hasn't really done anything for me, lately."

Hood stared at him for a long moment, stiff and silent. Then he pulled out his wallet, yanked out a handful of bills, and slapped them on the counter.

"Keep the change," he said, sounding more hurt than a near-stranger had any right to be, and strode away to wait for his order. Sighing, Dick picked up the bills to find that all of them were hundreds. God. His job fucking sucked.

The walk home wasn't any better. All the buildings close by weren't accessible to anyone but their inhabitants, and Dick wasn't willing to go into an alley to climb a fire escape. He jammed his hands in his pockets and walked quickly, head down while his eyes scanned every direction in case someone tried to jump him.

His encounter with the Red Hood had shaken him, even more so than last time. The bastard kept stirring up memories of Jason, and Dick still couldn't think of his brother for long without tumbling into a spiral of his own thoughts.

He was distracted and in his own head, so he hadn't noticed the man until it was too late. Now this fucker was brandishing a knife at him and demanding his wallet. Right. Because Dick's near empty bank account and six dollars in cash was such a prize.

This guy didn't even look that experienced. His grip on the knife was awkward and loose, and his hand shook just slightly as he held it out for Dick's wallet. Dick could absolutely take this guy. He reached back, subtly preparing to throw a punch.

Before he could, a shadow shot into his field of vision and tackled the guy, knocking him over. The Batman stood over Dick's would-be mugger, lifting his fist to knock him out.

Dick took this as an opportunity to disappear. He was already in the alley, so he leapt up onto the fire escape and began to climb. Dick was fairly muscular, but his life as an acrobat had made him light and agile. Soundlessly reaching the roof, Dick looked for a place to hide. The Bat wouldn't expect a random citizen to escape via rooftop, but if he did realize, there weren't many places to stay out of sight.

On this particular roof, though, there was a space between the AC unit and the roof access door. It looked just wide enough for Dick to fit. He made a beeline for the gap, wedging himself inside without a second thought.

His shoulder collided with something warm, and behind him, someone made a strangled squeaking sort of noise. Dick stiffened. The space was too small for him to turn and see what— *who* —was behind him, and at the moment, he didn't care. "Shhh!" he hissed, and began scanning the rooftops for any sign of the Bat, only relaxing moments later when he saw a dark shape grappling away.

Safe from another unwanted vigilante encounter, Dick scrambled out of the gap. "Fuck, I'm sorry," he said, turning to offer a hand to the person already standing up behind him. He had approximately half a second before his thoughts were wiped out with a blanket of shock.

He was small, way too small for his age. His black hair stuck up in an unkempt rat's nest, so greasy that Dick wondered when he'd last taken a shower. A battered gray jacket, threads away from falling apart completely, covered his shoulders and reached down almost to his knees. His knuckles were white as he held onto the camera in his hands. It was different from the one Bruce bought him when he was six and mentioned in passing how he wanted to learn photography.

"Tim?" The voice was his, but Dick didn't process himself saying it. He was too busy looking at his brother and wondering, *where did the light go?*

Because Tim was looking back at him, his mouth opened in an expression of shock, but his eyes were dull and expressionless. "Dick," he said, and his voice was surprised but still *dead* , hollow beneath the thinnest imitation of emotion.

"I—you—" Words refused to leave Dick's mouth in coherent sequences. He'd always been a tactile person, even when he stopped initiating hugs and refused to ask for physical contact from anyone. So he opened his arms and stepped forwards, careful of the camera, and wrapped his arms around his baby brother for the first time in four years.

Tim stiffened for half a moment, and Dick tensed, scared that he'd overstepped a boundary, caused discomfort in some way. But just as quickly, Tim melted. His hands came up to clutch handfuls of the back of Dick's jacket as he clung to him, and Dick held on tighter. He

fought the tears forming in his eyes because goddamnit this may be an emotional moment but he was the big brother here, and he *could not cry* right now because he was the older brother and he had to be comforting. He didn't have time to break down now.

He had no idea how long the hug lasted, but by the time they let go, Dick's arms had begun to cramp. For a long moment, he just looked at Tim. The only times he'd seen him since That Night had been on television when his parents dragged him out to fundraisers and galas. The cameras had apparently hidden just how hollow his brother had become.

"I missed you." It seemed like the right thing to say—the only thing to say. He never thought he'd see Tim again. When he broke his promise and left him at Drake Manor, he'd thought it was for the best, even knowing as he did it that Tim had believed him. Tim had trusted him, and he'd waited for a brother who never came back.

"I…" Tim tested the words in his mouth, eyebrows furrowing as he considered them. "I missed you too."

An awkward silence permeated the space between them. Really, what did you say to your sort of long lost brother-not-by-blood-or-legality? Dick definitely saw Tim as his brother—that had never changed—but who could say if Tim felt the same?

"You're really short."

That was definitely an example of the *wrong* thing.

Tim snorted, though. "Not all of us have gone through puberty yet, Dick."

There. A glimpse of Tim, the *real* Tim, sharp-tongued and quick. It was gone just as quickly as it appeared, but Dick held on to the sight.

"You should hurry up, then," he replied, trying valiantly for a smirk. "They'll never let you on the rollercoasters at this rate."

Tim's mouth dropped open in surprise. "That's rude," he said.

"Offended, but not denying it."

"Hey!"

Tim swung a fist at him playfully. Dick hopped backwards easily and

laughed, striding forward to get Tim in a headlock, messing up his hair with one hand. As soon as his grip loosened, Tim ducked away. He was already slowing down from the brief moment of fun, eyes drooping. That was when Dick noticed the way he swayed slightly, blinking often like he was fighting to keep his eyes open.

The grin slid off his face. “Baby bird, when was the last time you slept?”

“Last night,” Tim said smoothly, voice so calm and reasonable that if Dick wasn’t looking directly at him, he’d never have picked up on the falsehood.

“Yeah, right. Try again.”

Tim ducked his head and scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the ground. “Monday,” he mumbled. It was Thursday. Dick could feel himself pale.

“Tim, what the fuck?” he blurted, then winced. “Shi—crap. Sorry. Tim, what the heck?” It had been a long time since Dick had needed to censor himself.

“Haven’t been tired.” Tim shrugged.

“Haven’t been tired?” With the realization of Tim’s sleeplessness came the reminder that they were on a roof. In Gotham. Several miles from Drake Manor. At *night* . “Oh my god, I should never have left you alone.”

“What?”

And fuck. Tim seemed genuinely confused, as though for the life of him, he couldn’t see what was wrong with where they were. Sleep deprived, hollow, in the middle of one of the most dangerous cities in the goddamn country. Dick wanted to scream.

All he could do was repeat himself. “I shouldn’t have left you.” God, he knew what leaving Tim could do. He’d fucking *known* what the solitude of that house could do to a person. He’d known and he’d left Tim there, and then he didn’t even come *back* for him like he said he would!

“It’s fine, Dick. I handled it.”

Words were piling up in Dick’s throat, four years of *good job* ’s and *I*

love you 's and *how was your day?* 's and *brother, brother, brother.* They clogged his throat and glued his teeth shut like Alfred's peanut butter fudge on New Year's. And still, Tim was looking at him with that face, free of mistrust or blame. Dick wanted to shake him.

Wake up! he wanted to scream. *Wake up and see how I failed you! Wake up and realize that you deserved so much better! You deserved better than me!*

He didn't say any of that. As his tears spilled over, and oh, how Dick hated himself for having the audacity to cry, all he could choke out was, "I'm so *sorry* ."

"Why?"

Dick shattered. Something in his chest was too tight, and his anger was giving way to guilt. It was so powerful that if he let it take hold right now, Dick would collapse, and he couldn't do that in front of Tim. He couldn't.

"Okay." Tears turned his voice thick and hoarse. Dick swallowed hard, forcing back the lump in his throat. He dug a marker out of his pocket and reached for Tim's arm. "Come here."

Tim didn't hesitate, stepping close and letting Dick scrawl a number onto his forearm.

"That's my number." Dick fought to keep his voice somewhere near steady. "Go home—I mean it, Timmy, go home and get some sleep—and text me. I'm not leaving you again, but I've got some stuff to do tonight. If you don't, I'm gonna go to your house and make you take a nap. Alright?"

Tim nodded silently. He was so damn unreactive.

"Okay. Go home," Dick repeated. He pulled Tim into one more hug, cupping the back of his head and squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. Then he pulled away. "I'll see you tomorrow, alright?"

"Yeah, alright," Tim said.

"Good. Okay. Okay."

Like a coward, Dick left his baby brother on the roof, abandoning his acrobatics in favor of speed, getting as far away as he could as fast as possible, sprinting back to his apartment. The roofs held no freedom

for him tonight. There was only guilt, loss, and a baby bird all by himself.

Dick had promised to come back for Tim, and instead he'd left him to become a ghost.

He tumbled into his apartment, tugging the window shut behind him before he sank down, hugging his knees to a chest. Sobs wracked his body, and Dick pressed a hand over his mouth. The neighbors couldn't hear this. No one could hear this.

There was no sleep for Dick tonight. He could only stay, curled on the ground as he lost himself to memories and regret and shame. He'd failed both of them. He'd failed, and it was all his fault.

Chapter 5: Little Bird, Found a Memory

Chapter Notes

> Sorry this probably isn't the best writing. Got hit really hard with something a few hours ago and wrote the chapter for a distraction. A song I'd recommend to fit it would be Be Nice to Me by the Front Bottoms.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: self harm, spiraling thoughts

Tim could feel the ink on his arm long after it dried. It prickled on his skin as he biked back to Bristol, exhaustion weighing heavily on every part of him. None of tonight had been expected, and it grated on him. Tim didn't like when plans derailed.

By the time he got back to his house, the shock was taking its toll on him. For once, exhaustion seemed to be winning in its constant battle with his mind. Tim dragged himself up the stairs, shrugging his jacket off by his bedroom door and toeing his shoes off next to the dresser. He collapsed onto his bed and fished his phone out of his pocket, blinking sleepily at the screen as he opened a new contact.

After entering the number Dick gave him, Tim paused. A hundred possible nicknames for the contact ran through his mind: *Dick, Dickface, Big Bird* . In the end, he wrote *Richard Grayson* with what some would consider a concerning lack of emotion, given that he was forging a line of contact between himself and his brother for the first time in four years.

Tim typed out a message like he'd promised.

Tim Drake: *Hello, this is Tim.*

Then he let his phone fall from his hand to the carpeted floor and closed his eyes.

Sleep, being the little shit it was, did not immediately claim him. No, instead, Tim got to sit with his brain's replay of the entire interaction with Dick.

The whole thing had been utterly perplexing. Try as he might to reach through the space between them and *understand* Dick's actions, Tim found himself locked out. His attempt to connect emotionally was met with a wall. Tim could try and break through, he could try to climb, he could walk until his feet were sore to find the end, and the wall would stay there just the same.

What made it worse was that Tim knew Dick wasn't shutting him out. He'd seen the tears flowing down his brother's face and noted how his body shook with suppressed emotion. If Dick had been hiding his emotions, he wouldn't have been crying.

Dick had reached out, offering his feelings for Tim to understand, to share, and Tim had been unable to meet him in the middle.

Releasing a frustrated groan, Tim wrapped his blanket tighter around himself and buried his face in the pillow. He hated these thoughts. They twisted his gut around and made his skin feel too tight. They pushed the rest of the world away and made Tim feel like the only person in existence, because he should have been able to meet Dick in the middle. He should have been capable of that. Everyone else he knew was able to do it as easily as breathing. On TV and in real life, people moved around each other with some invisible understanding that Tim could never see. It was like they'd all been born with an instruction manual in their heads that Tim had never gotten.

Even before his emotions had faded, withering down to an indifferent numbness, it had been like this. Tim imagined himself in a glass box, every interaction indistinguishable from those of others, except he never managed to make contact. He still *cared* . He still loved other people. He just never seemed to be able to communicate that the right way.

"Get out, get out, get out," Tim muttered. Shoving his face further into the pillow, he rapped sharply on his head with his fist. These thoughts hurt; they *itched* . He wanted to dislodge them. He wanted them to topple off their pedestal in his mind. Downstairs, he knew, there was a solution. If he just opened the glass cabinet, he could turn the thoughts off. He could make it stop.

But lead had filled Tim's bones. He didn't think he could get out of bed if he tried.

So he stayed, his body numb but his mind so painfully full, until he lost awareness.

Tim's return to consciousness was sudden and swift. One moment, he was dead to the world. The next, his eyes were open, despite Tim having no memory of opening them. His mind was running at hyperspeed, like when a movie pauses to load and then rushes through the next few seconds. Rolling over, Tim reached down for his phone without even processing that he was doing it. Blearily, he tapped the screen and was greeted by a cascade of messages.

Richard Grayson(4:26 am): *Timmy! I'm so glad you texted. Listen, I know you probably hate me and I deserve it and if you never want to hear from me again I'll respect that, but if you maybe do want to talk we could meet for coffee? Or anything else you'd want ofc, idk*

Richard Grayson(8:17 am): *Tim? I'm sorry if you don't want to hear from me, but could you please respond to at least let me know if you want to talk?*

Richard Grayson(8:18 am): *No pressure either way tho!! Just wondering*

Richard Grayson(8:22 am): *Wait fuck you're probably still sleeping sorry*

Richard Grayson(8:23 am): *I mean frick sorry*

Richard Grayson(8:25 am): *You better be asleep tho*

Tim scrolled through the rest. Most were questions like *are you awake yet???* or *would you rather do ice cream?*

As the timestamps got later, though, Dick's messages turned worried. Tim could see why. When he checked the time—and the date—he realized he'd slept through the entire day and into the next afternoon.

Huh. Nice.

He decided to stop Dick's mother hen panic, sending him a quick, *Was sleeping sorry. Coffee's good.* , before stumbling out of bed and down to the kitchen. While he waited for a pot of coffee to brew, Tim paced in a circle, absentmindedly nibbling on a tortilla. Was it a normal

breakfast food? No. Did Tim care? Also no. At least he wanted to eat it.

When the coffee was done, Tim poured himself a mug and checked his phone. Dick had texted back. He'd texted back a while ago, actually, right when Tim first replied.

Richard Grayson: *Good. You needed it*

Richard Grayson: *But you said coffee was good*

Richard Grayson: *Would you be okay with meeting today?*

Sure , Tim replied. He hopped up so he was sitting cross legged on the counter. Watching the dots on the screen as Dick typed was almost hypnotic.

Richard Grayson: *Ok! Great*

Dick suggested a coffee shop Tim knew a few blocks away from Gotham academy. They set a time for three—in two hours—and Tim returned to his room, wondering whether Dick found going outside as exhausting as Tim did.

The coffee shop was small, not too crowded, and dimly lit. Tim got there before Dick did. He ordered a black coffee with two shots of espresso and took a seat in the booth farthest from the door. He stayed, watching the door, until Dick came in.

When he'd seen him last, Dick's hair had been messy, the tips dyed a washed out blue. He was in a cheesy Batburger t-shirt and jeans. Now, Dick was still wearing jeans and a t-shirt, but it was more fitting and solid blue. He had his hands shoved into the pockets of a worn black jacket with a blue stripe near the bottom. His hair was…actually, it was still messy, but more of a normal messy than *I'm-too-tired-to-give-a-shit* messy.

Dick was scanning the small shop before he was halfway through the door. He spotted Tim immediately and his entire face brightened. He waved before heading over to the register. Tim watched as the barista, a college aged guy with longish black hair, visibly melted when Dick smiled at him.

Dick didn't seem to notice. He ordered, received a cold something

with a mountain of whipped cream on top, and came to take the seat opposite Tim.

“Hey,” he said. His voice sounded different than he did on Thursday. It was lighter, less tired.

“Hey,” Tim said back. He sounded the same.

Dick’s smile twitched, and Tim wondered how he managed to screw up with a single word.

“How…how’ve you been?”

“Good.” It’s accurate enough. “You?”

“I’ve been alright.” Dick’s fingers drummed against the table top, then went to hold his drink, then went back to drumming. “What’s—God, I don’t really know what to say.”

Tim shrugged and took a sip of his coffee. What *was* there to say? They’d been together, then they weren’t. Now they were back again, and neither one mentioned that they were sitting at a table for three.

Dick’s eyes darted around the shop and came to rest on Tim’s cup. His eyes bulged. “Holy shit—crap, sorry—why are there two shots of espresso in your coffee?”

Tim shrugged again. “Wanted energy. And you can cuss, I don’t care.”

“Well, I do. You’re thirteen. People shouldn’t curse around thirteen year olds.” Leaning back in his chair, Dick crossed his arms with an incredulous smile. “But, dang, Timmy, no wonder you’re so short.”

“I know.” Tim had long since learned the effects of coffee on his body. Worsening anxiety, sleep impairment, just generally fucking with your heart. But, at the end of the day, it gave him energy. It kept him going. Tim didn’t really care about much else.

“Oh. Alright, then.” Dick ran a nervous hand through his hair, and Tim realized too late that he’d been trying to joke with him. *Stupid* .

He tried to offer something. “How’s—” Fuck, what did he say here? What did he ask about? There was no information about Dick’s life that he knew—wait. “How’s your job?” Dick had been wearing a Batburger t-shirt on Thursday, and the smell of cooking oil had surrounded him. That was a thing about Dick’s personal life that they

could talk about.

But it was, once again, the wrong thing to say. Dick grimaced, his shoulders dropping. “Oh. I…I don’t know, Timmy. It’s a job.” When he looked up again, his eyes were tired. “I need it to pay bills, and I don’t know anywhere else. I figured Batburger was as good as anything.”

“Oh.” Tim wrapped his hands around his cup, letting the hot liquid inside burn his palms to stay focused. He’d noticed Dick eyeing his jacket, the frayed sleeves and ripped fabric. Hunching his shoulders, Tim stared at the table. “Is there a job you want?”

Dick paused. “I haven’t thought about that in years.” Silence stretched between them. Dick licked the whipped cream off the top of his drink, and Tim subtly watched the barista make heart eyes at his back. Just as he was settling into the silence, Dick said, “I think I wanted to teach gymnastics.”

Tim looked up and found his brother staring at his hands, folding and unfolding the cuff of his jacket over and over again. Beneath the table, his leg bounced. “You’re an amazing acrobat.” Back then, Before, Tim had wanted to learn how to do gymnastics like Dick could. He wanted to be able to soar through the air and feel like he was flying. Dick was teaching him, but then everything happened, and Tim forgot about it. “You’re a good teacher, too.”

“Thanks, baby bird.” There was something thick in Dick’s voice. He still wasn’t looking at Tim, which Tim didn’t particularly mind, but when they were younger, he’d learned it was one of Dick’s tells for nervousness.

“Maybe you could go to college and get a degree in sports medicine or something,” Tim suggested.

Dick snorted. Not in a mean way, Tim was pretty sure. “I can’t afford that.”

“Oh.”

And it was back to the silence. There really was nothing to say. At this point, the only logical move was to pick up where they left off and work out the kinks as they went. But it felt like there was something they had to do, something that would suddenly make up four years of absence. And that third chair was still just *sitting there* .

“Do you know what happened to Jason?” Tim asked. Dick started,

looking at Tim with wide eyes full of…something. Sadness? Regret? Loneliness?

It took a few tries for Dick to get the words out. Tim waited patiently as he opened his mouth and closed it again, shook his head and bounced his leg. He was starting to wish he'd brought a fidget.

"Yeah," Dick finally said. "I do." His voice was rough and strained.

"He's buried in Gotham Cemetery." Why was he adding this? Why did he keep talking?

"Oh," Dick said faintly.

"I visit him most weeks." *I've never seen you there* .

"Oh. That's…yeah. I think he'd like that." Dick closed his eyes for a long moment. A few tears dripped from his lashes, and he wiped them away with astounding speed. Vaguely, Tim wondered when the last time he'd cried was. Then his brain spat an idea at him.

"Would you like to come with me?"

Dick's eyes opened. He tilted his head, peering at Tim from beneath his bangs. "What?"

"Would you like to come with me? To visit him. Jason."

The longer Dick stayed silent, the more uncomfortable Tim got. He shifted in his seat, picking at the skin around his nails. He was about to backtrack, apologize for the invitation and change the topic, when Dick nodded.

"I'd like that. Yeah. I'd love to visit him with you, Tim."

Relief flooded through him. Tim drained the last bit of his coffee and tried a smile. "Cool."

It wasn't the best reunion. It was never going to be, Tim thought, because there should have been three of them and now it was only two. But he and Dick were still sitting in the coffee shop, and they were trying to remember what it felt like to have a brother. Maybe one day Tim would figure it out.

Chapter 6: Lonely Bird, Lost in Memories

Chapter Notes

> Alrighty, this one's not as long but I didn't really want to drag it out cause it felt good to end it there. Song rec for this one is Eleanor Rigby by Cody Fry.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: death

Dick's parents were buried in Gotham Cemetery. He knew that. He'd always known it. It was a fact that became routine after enough time thinking about it. *Your parents are dead. They are here, in a box beneath the dirt, and you will never see them smile or hear them speak or feel their love for the rest of your life.* He was used to it.

Only when he stepped through the gate did it finally hit him that this place now held three of his family members. The realization choked him,making him trip over himself. Tim, wearing the same ratty jacket as yesterday, glanced over. Dick forced a smile and continued onward, letting his little brother lead.

He'd only visited Jason's grave once. A few weeks after the death was reported, when Dick was sure he'd been buried. Late at night, he'd stolen some cash from his foster parents and paid a taxi to drive him up to Bristol.

The grave was just like he remembered it. A small headstone, cheaply engraved with Jason's name and lifespan, which Dick studiously avoided looking at. There was no epitaph.

Tim stepped forwards and crouched by the grave. Carefully, he pulled out a rag and wiped away the dirt that had blown onto the headstone. He brushed away dead leaves and picked up an empty water bottle, sticking it in his pocket.

Finally, Tim picked up what Dick now registered was a withered arrangement of flowers. He put them in the pocket with the bottle and reached into another one, producing a few oddly colored rocks.

Dick shifted on his feet. He hadn't thought to bring anything. Was he supposed to bring something? Was he supposed to *say* something? Movies always showed people talking to headstones, but Dick couldn't see any point. It was a hunk of stone marking his brother's corpse.

Beneath Dick's feet, Jason Todd's body was being eaten by worms.

He swallowed back the sudden need to vomit.

"I brought you these," Tim said, still facing the grave. His hair was still shaggy and limp with grease. Dick wasn't sure how to ask if he was taking care of himself. "You always wanted to find cool rocks, so I found some for you. I think they match our eyes."

Huh? Quietly craning his neck to peer over Tim's shoulder, Dick studied the rocks.

The first was small and uneven. It was a dark blue-green, like the part of the ocean where the water turns deep. In it were small specks of a darker hue that caught the sun like glass. It matched Tim's eyes, but not how they were now. This was how they'd looked Before, when they were still okay.

The second would be round and smooth, were it not for the side that looked like it had been broken off. This one was dark and monochrome, the blue-bordering-on-gray of storm clouds just before a downpour. It reminded him of the look in Jason's eyes the day he broke a kid's nose for using the f-slur.

The final stone was dusty and large. It looked like something you'd pick up from a hiking trail just for the hell of it. The faintest hint of blue tinged the gray, making it look like ice on a frozen lake, if the sky were full of clouds. Dick recognized the color of his own eyes, dull with exhaustion.

"You should know the Joker escaped again last week." Tim was practically dead to the world around him, absorbed in his one way conversation. "Batman caught him before he could do anything, though. I thought you'd be glad about that."

Dick remembered that day. The emergency sirens had gone off while he was at work and he'd been stuck hiding under the counter for three hours. That night, he'd had even more trouble than usual washing away the smell of grease.

"I also wanted to remind you that none of it's your fault," Tim continued. "There was nothing you could have done to stop him, and it wasn't your responsibility to. No one but the Joker is to blame for it." An unexpected steel reinforced Tim's voice. "I wish Batman would just kill him."

And then the steel was gone. Tim pushed himself to his feet and turned to Dick, watching him owlishly. “Do you want to say anything?”

Dick blinked, trying to process the five different mood shifts from the past thirty seconds. Truthfully, he didn’t know what to say. There was a time when he might, when the right words to fix everything just appeared to him, giving him whatever he needed to fix any hurt. But now, all he seemed capable of producing were rusted attempts at comfort.

He dug his hands deeper in his pockets. “Uh. Yeah. I miss you, Jay.” There were a million other things he could say. God knew he thought them enough, sitting in bed after waking up from a nightmare, head between his knees. He had an endless supply of goodbyes and apologies in him.

All those words went away under Tim’s watchful stare, though; and really, why did it matter? Jason was dead. He’d never hear what Dick had to say, and it didn’t matter because none of it would bring him back.

Dick coughed into his fist. “I…That’s it.” Tim didn’t say anything. He just nodded and stepped back to stand next to Dick. Almost without thinking, Dick stepped closer so their shoulders pressed together(or, more accurately, Tim’s shoulder pressed somewhere above his elbow. The kid was tiny.). Tim just leaned back into the touch silently. Together, they gazed at the headstone, Dick trying to understand how his emotions managed to shut themselves off so fast.

Later, when they were walking back, Tim asked bluntly, “Are you upset about what I said?”

Dick started. He’d been on autopilot, trying to sort through his thoughts. What?”

“About the Joker. Because I mean it.” Tim’s expression hardened. “I want him to be dead.”

There was definitely a right way to respond to this, the way a *brother* should respond to this. Dick should kneel down with his hands on Tim’s shoulders, meet his eyes, and explain that it was okay to be angry, but killing was wrong, and things would work out.

Maybe he could even tell it like Bruce and set Tim up to have the rug pulled out from under him. It wasn’t fair to be mad at Bruce for that,

Dick knew. But look where he was. Him and all his hope, six feet under.

So yeah, there was a right way to respond. But Dick hadn't been able to do anything right in four years, so he did what he'd learned to do: what he thought was best.

"I'm not upset, Tim," he said. "Honestly, I want him to be dead too."

"Oh." Clearly Tim had been expecting something else. He'd probably thought Dick would take the high road. Oh, well.

Dick kept talking. "He deserves it. He took Jason." There was a fine line here, a point between 'sharing your feelings cathartically' and 'trauma dumping all your anger issues on a thirteen year old who's clearly got issues of his own'. "I think we both want our brother back."

Behind them, a chunk of debris slid off of where it had gotten stuck in the chapel's roof.

Tim nodded. "So I'm not wrong?"

Dick held out his arm in offering. Tim pressed himself against his side, and Dick wrapped the arm around his shoulders. "I don't think you're wrong. But, I'm also not the most qualified person to judge that." For just a moment, he remembered the right thing to say. "No matter if you're right morally, your emotions are always valid, Tim. Just wanted to make sure you knew that."

"Okay."

Okay .

Chapter 7: Lonely Bird, Back in Time

Chapter Notes

> This one was so fun. For a song, I recommend Ghosts by Jacob Tillberg. Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of course. The one time Dick decided to go for a walk; stretch his legs, get some fresh air, feel the sun on his skin. That *would* be the time Scarecrow chose to pull some deranged bullshit.

Dick had walked back to the coffee shop where he'd met Tim a few days ago. After visiting Jason, they planned to meet again in a few days at Dick's apartment. He was still trying to plan something for them to do. Go for ice cream? Watch a movie? Maybe he could find a second hand gaming console. The excessive thought he was putting into it made Dick antsy, so he went for coffee(and yes, he knew the coffee could very easily just make him more antsy. Sue him.).

He'd been within sight of the fucking door when someone reached out of an alley—seriously, could the government invest in some lights for those? It was genuinely a fucking problem—, grabbed Dick, and knocked him out with a blow to the head.

When he came to, he was lying flat, staring up at a dark ceiling yards above his head. His shirt was missing. Electronodes were stuck to his chest, and a steady, albeit quick, beeping noise sounded a little ways behind him.

Light was coming from beside him, but when he tried to sit up and look around, he found his limbs strapped down. All he could do was move his head. Every time he did, pain burst through his skull, originating at the spot where he'd been hit.

Turning it slowly, Dick took in his surroundings.

To his left, there was—as expected—a lamp. It shone an intense yellow light that hurt Dick's eyes. It illuminated the space for a good twenty feet from where he lay in all directions.

On his right side, things got very concerning very fast—as though being strapped to a table and hooked up to a heart monitor wasn't already. There was a gray canister of gas hooked up to a mask, which

sat on a metal tray containing several other medical instruments, including a scalpel and a thermometer.

Dick let his head fall back to its original position. “Fuck,” he muttered.

“Oh, you’re awake!” A nasal, reddy voice assaulted Dick’s ears. “Excellent! I’ve been waiting a long time, which is a bit rude of you. Although, I suppose it isn’t *all* your fault. I told those idiots to obtain you *without damage* .” The voice turned furious in those last words, shaking with the intensity. A moment later, the canvas mask of Scarecrow was hovering over Dick’s face. *Great* .

“Now that you’re awake, though, we can make sure they didn’t do *too* much damage.” Wheels screeched as Scarecrow pulled over the tray of medical instruments. Dick held back a flinch at the noise. Scarecrow bent back over him with a flashlight. “Follow this.”

Without thinking, Dick complied. Scarecrow watched silently, then nodded and clicked the flashlight off. “That seems fine. Now tell me, are you feeling nauseous at all? Dizzy? Confused?”

Oh, right. Dick didn’t want to cooperate with this jackass. He glared silently at his captor.

“Well, that’s rude,” Scarecrow sighed. “I suppose we’ll simply carry on.”

He went to the heart monitor and retrieved a blood pressure cuff, which he fastened around Dick’s arm, then put a probe on his finger. While the devices took their measurements, the idiot just kept talking.

“See, this new formula I’ve been working on is pretty new. My work had to be put on hold when that stupid Bat put me into Arkham. Terrible place by the way, not at all good for one’s mental health.” Scarecrow ran the thermometer over Dick’s forehead. “I do think this strain will be quite useful on the Bat, though. See, it induces the memory of a traumatic event in the past. Quite difficult to get right. I had to figure out how to make it target the amygdala and the neocortex—difficult, but fascinating.”

For the record, Dick did not find it at all fascinating. He found it even less fascinating when Scarecrow lifted the gas canister—scrawny as he was, he could only get it a few inches off the ground—and lugged it over beside Dick. The heavy thud when it was set down seemed to snap Dick out of his denial.

Shit, this was really going to happen. This was going to happen, and Batman wouldn't know because there had been no news of an Arkham breakout, so no one had noticed Scarecrow missing. If the Bat didn't know, then Red Hood definitely didn't, and Dick was starting to rely on him more than Batman. At least he managed to actually help. But those thoughts weren't important, because Scarecrow had picked up the mask, and Dick knew *exactly* where this stuff would put him.

He struggled against the straps, craning his neck and twisting his head away from Scarecrow. The heart monitor beeped faster. The straps stayed just as tight. Scarecrow tutted, and his hand shot out. He grabbed Dick's chin. Not without effort—Dick was proud of that—he forced Dick's head back towards him. As he raised the mask, Dick struck out in one last act of resistance(or maybe it was just pettiness). He spat at Scarecrow, and a glob of saliva landed on his mask.

"Well, there was no need for *that* ," Scarecrow chided, and then the mask was covering Dick's face.

Dick held his breath as gas flooded his now small breathing space, still struggling to dislodge it. In response, Scarecrow hit him sharply in the diaphragm. Dick gasped reflexively, and the gas filled his lungs.

For the first few moments, nothing happened. Dick could hear Scarecrow begin a recording— "Test of Essence de Trauma, Trial One. Subject is male, approximately twenty years old. Vital signs suggested…"

But his voice faded as a buzzing hum filled Dick's ears, and his surroundings turned muted. He blinked hard, trying to keep his vision from swaying, to stop the sudden feeling of claustrophobia, to ignore the aching scar on his side. None of it helped.

The hum turned to the rapid crackling of flames. Heat seared the air, sucking away the moisture until Dick was positive he was being cooked alive. He threw aside his comforter and swung himself out of bed, running to the door. When he touched it, it burned his hand. Dick yelped and ran back to his bed. Dragging the comforter over, he wrapped his hand in the thick fabric and again twisted the knob.

The door opened into a hallway lined with flames. They licked hungrily at the wallpaper and turned the carpet to ash. All Dick had to protect his feet were his socks, but he ran, screaming as he went: "Jay! Timmy!"

"Dick?" Jason was outside his room, frantically taking in the situation.

His eyes widened when he caught sight of his brother, and he ran to him. Dick automatically reached out, pulling him close. “Tim?”

“I think he’s in his room.” Smoke turned Dick’s voice hoarse. Coughing, he and Jason moved together towards Tim’s room down the hall. When they reached it, Dick covered his hand with his sleeve before touching the knob.

His sleeve wasn’t as good protection as the comforter; the hot metal scorched his hand, but Dick gritted his teeth and pushed the door open. Tim, somehow, was still in bed, a tiny lump with a nest of black hair poking out the top.

“Tim!” Jason screamed, but his voice cracked with smoke. Dick could hardly breathe. The smoke was turning the air thick. They didn’t have much time.

Letting go of Jason, he darted into the room. Tim’s desk was on fire. His school books, his hoodie, his journal(a gift from Bruce), all curled and blackened as they succumbed to the flames.

Dick shook Tim, yelling his name. Jason joined him from the doorway. Together, their screams broke through. Tim shot up, instantly awake. “What’s going on?” His eyes widened when he saw his burning desk.

“We need—” Dick coughed “—go.” Grabbing Tim’s hand, he pulled him from the bed and back to the hall, where he put his arm back around Jason, holding them close to him. His eyes ran, but the tears evaporated off his face. Together, the three of them ran.

Fire snapped at their heels, spurring them on. Bruce’s room was on the other side of the house. Dick just had to get Jason and Tim outside; then he could go find his dad. But when they burst out onto the landing, Dick froze.

The ceiling of the hall leading to Bruce’s room had caved in. There was no way past. If Bruce wasn’t already out, he was dead.

Tim squeezed Dick’s hand. “We have to go,” He croaked, even as he stared at the debris blocking the way to Dick’s last chance at a parent, his face pinched in grief.

Jason let out a hacking cough, shuddering against Dick’s side. Tim was right. They couldn’t stay. At least Alfred was on vacation. Dick didn’t know if he could be persuaded to leave while Bruce may still be

inside.

Tightening his grip on his brothers, Dick led the way down the stairs. They leapt the last three and stumbled on the fall. Something brushed against his side and set it burning. He paid it no mind as he pulled Jason and Tim towards the door. It was already on fire. This time, adrenaline was Dick's protection when he turned the handle, letting go of Tim to do it. When the door was open, they barreled out and down the steps, falling into the dewey grass.

The cold dampness sang against Dick's burned skin. He lay, eyes cracked open, chest heaving for breath. Bruce was not outside. He scanned the lawn and the Manor, searching for a sign, any indicator of his father—

On the second floor, fourth window to the left, there was a figure. Dick knew that figure. He'd waved at it from the lawn, pausing between games of tag and soccer, looking up from an ice cream cone or threateningly rolling a snowball.

That was Bruce's window.

Before he could fully register what he was doing, Dick was up, heading back for the door in a stumbling run. Bruce was still in there. *Dad* was still in there. Dick had to get to him.

A hand caught his wrist. Dick was the strongest brother, always had been. Tim was just tiny, but Jason could probably have outgrown him if he weren't coming from years of malnourishment. Even so, the hand refused to let go until Dick turned. Jason was clinging to him, tears streaking through the soot on his face.

"He's in there!" Dick screamed, struggling to keep going, to get back inside. Jason held on. He kept screaming, dissolving into sobs as desperation truly took over, "Bruce! *Bruce!* DAD!"

"Dick!" Jason yelled, but the voice was too deep for him, and his hand was on Dick's shoulder now, and *this wasn't how it happened* . "Dick, wake up! You gotta wake up!"

Dick's eyes flew open. He surged up, swinging his fist blindly. Scarecrow. The gas. That *stupid fucking heart monitor* , beeping ever faster.

Strong arms caught him and held him steady. "Dick, you have to calm down. It's over." Dick realized that the voice wasn't Scarecrow's

nasally whine. It was rough and deep, overflowing with urgency, and thick with something near tears.

As awareness flooded back to him, Dick's vision cleared. He was no longer strapped down. The electronodes had been removed. Someone's arms were still around him, someone in black armor and a brown jacket.

Hood.

When Dick's breathing slowed, Hood released him, silently holding out Dick's shirt. Dick took it and pulled it on, noticing as he did so that Scarecrow was unconscious by the heart monitor.

Hood passed him a bottle of water. "Are you alright?"

Before answering, Dick chugged half of it. He could still taste smoke in his mouth. "Yeah," he coughed. His throat was sore. He'd probably been screaming out loud. "Yeah, I'm great."

"Alright, tough guy." Hood crossed his arms, watching Dick as he continued to drink. " Did he do anything else to you?" Dick just shook his head, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as he put the empty bottle down. "It's a good thing the antidote I had worked. This strain must be similar to the original."

"Yeah," Dick said. "How'd you know where I was?"

Hood turned shifty, looking away. "I was in the area. Heard the screams."

"Really? Cause I could've sworn there was some kind of soundproofing—"

A shot rang out. Hood yelled, grabbing his side, and a metallic ping sounded behind them. Before Dick could see where it had come from, Hood had his own gun in hand. He fired twice, and Scarecrow yelled as blood blossomed from his shoulder and his leg.

"Hood?" Dick got off the table as Hood stumbled back. He had to grab the edge for a moment when his knees buckled, but righted himself quickly. He approached Hood, holding out his hands. "Hood, let me see."

"No," Hood gritted out. "I'm fine," he added, as blood seeped out from beneath his hand.

Dick raised a brow, even as concern filled him. “That was a waste of breath. Come on, let me see. I can help.” He probably couldn’t really. Helping would probably include stitches, which Dick sure as hell didn’t know anything about.

“No,” Hood repeated.

“Hood, come on, you need help—”

“I said, no!” Hood ran. Even injured, he was fast, and Dick, still coming off the toxin, couldn’t catch up. He followed him out of the warehouse only to see him starting a motorcycle, driving off with one hand still holding his injured side.

The area this warehouse was located in was surprisingly populated. There were a good amount of people around(so Scarecrow most likely had soundproofed that warehouse. In fact, there was one guy who’d just pulled up on a motorcycle.

Dick charged at him, shoving him off before he could cut the power. Normally, he’d feel bad, but adrenaline ruled his brain right now. Tossing a *sorry* at the man on the ground, he pulled onto the road and sped after Hood.

Instead of returning to the crowded main city, Hood took a parallel route, skirting the industrial district and passing the docks. Dick followed, barely close enough to keep his quarry in sight. They entered the part of Gotham where old warehouses stood crumbling, unused even by traffickers or dealers.

Hood stopped in front of the most structurally sound one and clambered off the bike, not bothering to turn it off as he stumbled inside. Dick climbed off his own ride and let it fall to the ground, sprinting after Hood.

The inside of the warehouse was lit mostly by sunlight coming through holes in the roof. In the back corner, there was a mat like they had at gyms, surrounded by practice dummies and targets. Across from it, a mattress sat on a few palettes next to a lamp. Books were scattered around it. A fridge and cabinets had been clumsily installed by a wall, and a table/ workbench took up most of the right side.

Dick stood in the doorway, looking around for Hood, and froze.

He was by the table. He’d taken off his helmet, and it sat next to a domino that had also been discarded. A mess of black hair was stuck

to his head with sweat, but still managed to fall into his eyes. Hood was swearing as he unbuckled his armor to reveal a ripped black undershirt,soaked with blood on the right side.

Dick recognized that voice. He knew it from games of tag where he won, from Mario Kart tournaments, from the floor of Wayne Manor's foyer in the early hours of the morning.

Memories flooded into Dick's head as his brain tried to show him reason. Thirteen year old Jason Todd, his school photo in the newspaper below the headline: **Batman too late to save Joker victim.**

The obituary had made Dick put his fist through the wall, ending his stay at that particular foster home. It was so impersonal, so inaccurate. Jason had been the best at English. He'd never had much interest in becoming a well rounded student. He got in detention for breaking up fights by winning them, because 'the asshole deserved a taste of his own medicine, Dick. Tell me you've never wanted to break one of their noses.'

The funeral happened without Dick there. He didn't know if anyone even went. Jason's mom was dead at that point, and his dad was in prison. No one had known they were friends, so no one told Dick when to go.

But he saw the grave. He'd seen it yesterday, stared at it as Tim put those rocks down. He saw the second one again now, reflected in Hood's eyes.

Storm clouds.

A strangled sound escaped Dick's throat. Hood's head snapped up, his eyes widening in disbelief and horror when he realized he'd been found.

"Jay?"

Chapter End Notes

MMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM WHO'S POV NEXT I WONDER

Chapter 8: Lost Bird, Back Again

Chapter Notes

> Can I just say, writing reunions is hard??? These people haven't seen each other in years! They have no idea how to talk to each other!! I have to make them talk to each other!!! I have to write one more of these!!!! Do I still love it? Yes!!!!!
>
> Jason's POV, finally! I'm so happy I get to write his POV now, too. It's gonna be great.
>
> A good song for this chapter is Little Lion Man by Mumford and Sons.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: memories of trauma, non-graphic descriptions of torture, mentions of death, injury, needles, blood
>
> Enjoy!

Dying had hurt a million different ways.

There had been the helplessness. Tied up in that warehouse, Jason had struggled. He was never one to go down without a fight, and even alone, cold concrete freezing his skin through his clothes, that wasn't about to change. But when the Joker picked up that crowbar, Jason had heard it scrape against the floor. Right then, he'd realized that he had no control. What was going to happen was going to happen, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. There was no way to help himself out of the situation.

Then there was the anger. It was aimed in every direction and nowhere, all at once. Anger with himself, because how had he been stupid enough to let himself get grabbed? He had a fucking knife in his pocket, and the Joker didn't have a scratch on him. Of course, Jason was furious with the Joker, too. The bastard had no right to do any of this. He had no right to be breathing fresh fucking air, instead of rotting in Arkham like he deserved. But here he was, drawing sick enjoyment from Jason's pain. He was mad at his parents for not caring. They weren't there when he needed them, because his dad never gave a shit and his mom loved heroin more than she did her son. For the first few minutes, Jason's tears had been angry. They turned to ones of pain soon enough.

The part that hurt worst was the hope. Even as the crowbar smashed into Jason's legs, his head, his sides and his ribs, there had been hope. Hope that the next swing would be stopped by a masked figure, that Batman would be there to save him. This was the *Joker* , for fuck's sake! Even if Batman didn't care about the smaller pains in Gotham, Jason knew for a fact that the Joker was high profile enough for him. He'd been sure that any moment, Batman would be there to save him. But the moments kept passing, and Jason no longer had the strength to scream. Only when the Joker was gone, and he was watching the timer on the bomb tick down through one half-open eye, did he finally realize: no one was coming to save him.

Jason had felt a million different pains in the last four years, but somehow, seeing Dick on the operating table was an entirely new one.

He was still upset with Dick after their encounter at Batburger. The stupid part of it all was that it wasn't even Dick's fault. Jason knew what he'd gone through. He knew what the Gotham foster system did. It was exactly why he'd run away to escape it himself.

But Dick had always been bright. That was his thing, the pearl his existence based itself around. Dick Grayson, the one who could always be trusted to step in with a joke, whose hugs seemed to melt all the sadness from you until you could stomach the thought that maybe, just maybe, things would be alright. That was who Jason remembered as his big brother. Seeing him, so tired and dull and *done* , had sent him reeling, and Jason had never reacted well to having the rug pulled out from under him. So he'd snapped and stormed away.

He still loved him, though. So when the tracker Jason had stuck on him that first night went off, alerting him that Dick was outside city limits in the warehouse district were Bad Things happened, Jason had suited up and gone to check it out.

He never thought Scarecrow would have gotten to him.

The sight had frozen him for a few moments, trapped in the shadows. Dick was on the table, eyes squeezed shut. His whole body was shaking, but from the way his head was jerking, the restraints were the only reason he wasn't full on thrashing. Tears streamed down his cheeks and dripped to the table below. That wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was that Dick was *screaming* . Full volume, voice breaking, terrified screaming. And all of it was from that night.

"Jay! Tim!"

Jason almost dropped his gun. Dick's cries echoed all around the warehouse, bouncing off every wall and onto others, making a loop of misery that sounded like a sick parody of *his* laughter, in Jason's warehouse, in his hurt. Jason's big brother, the strong one, the bright one, the one who could make everything okay, was breaking. And like he was twelve years old again, the realization struck Jason to his very core.

Then he saw Scarecrow, checking the heart monitor as it beeped increasingly fast, scribbling notes, and muttering to himself with such goddamn *joy* , because of course that piece of shit enjoyed it. That was all it took to snap Jason out of it.

The Pit nudged at him, the fog filling his head, but Jason forced it down. He didn't care about killing anymore. As long as the person deserved it, Jason would pull the trigger and walk away without a scrap of guilt. Even without this specific incident, Scarecrow sure as hell deserved to eat a bullet. But Jason held himself back. He didn't want to kill in front of Dick. Even if he didn't know it was Jason holding the gun, even after what Jason heard at the cemetery, he feared the look in Dick's eyes if he saw Jason for what he was.

It was stupid and sentimental, and Jason didn't have time anymore for stupid and sentimental.

But.

Dick's screams covered the sound of his footsteps as he snuck up from behind. Scarecrow didn't have time to be startled before Jason knocked him out with the handle of his gun.

Without sparing him a second glance, he rushed to administer the antidote in his belt, praying that whatever this strain of toxin was, it would stop. It did. Jason removed the straps and the electronodes attached to Dick. When he shot up, Jason grabbed him in a hug. As he hugged his brother for the first time in four years, Jason told himself it was just to keep Dick steady.

He gave Dick water. Things were just close to okay again when Scarecrow shot him. Jason had reacted on instinct, barely pulling his shots back from lethal placement. When Dick came towards him, offering help because as disillusioned as he was with the world, he was Dick Grayson and he was a good person, Jason panicked. He ran, too absorbed in the pain to notice Dick following him.

And then he was in the safehouse, checking his wound. And then

there was the gasp. And then.

“Jay?”

Oh god ohgodohgodohgod I can’t do this he can’t be here fuck get him out god this fucking thing hurts.

“I’m taller than you,” Jason said without even processing the words.

Then Dick was running towards him at full speed, and Jason forgot his bullet wound as he got closer, preparing himself for one of Dick’s clingy, hold-you-tight-until-you-make-him-let-go hugs. Except Dick apparently did remember that he’d been shot. As he got closer, he slowed down until he closed the last few steps at a controlled stride.

He hugged Jason with his arms around his neck, chin on Jason’s shoulder, keeping distance between them from the chest down so he wouldn’t aggravate the wound. Jason leaned into it, pressing his face into Dick’s shoulder. There was too much adrenaline in his blood for him to cry, but it didn’t stop the way his mind sang *safe, safe, home* .

The hug lasted long enough for Jason to remember he was bleeding freely from his side. He let go, and Dick took a few quick steps back as Jason sat on the workbench and pulled up his shirt to get a look at the injury.

Luckily, the bullet had only grazed him. It’d managed to catch a chink in his armor that let it rip through, cutting into Jason’s side. It stung like a bitch, and there was a lot of blood, but he wasn’t going to die.

Leaning so he was nearly horizontal on the table, Jason firmly pressed a cloth to the injury and held it there. Dick watched with his mouth slightly open in shock.

Jason watched him back. He searched Dick’s face for any sign of hatred, or disgust, or fear. He knew now that his brother was a killer. More than that, his brother was a crime lord controlling the majority of the drug trade in Gotham.

Oh, and Jason died when he was thirteen. That was probably also a bit shocking. Had been for him too, when he woke up.

Dick’s expression didn’t reflect any of that. He just stared at Jason, eyes wide and— *oh* .

Dick was crying. Completely silently, tears slipped down his cheeks.

He wasn't even wiping them away.

"You're alive," he croaked.

Suddenly uncomfortable, Jason shifted, hissing when pain stabbed through the wound. "Yeah. Guess I am," he said, readjusting the pressure. The blood was beginning to clot. Soon he'd be able to clean it and stitch it up. Jason never looked forward to that part.

"How?"

Oof. Now *that* was a can of worms Jason didn't want to get into without several cups of coffee and a cheeseburger. Preferably with fries. And a milkshake.

Batburger was good, okay? Getting shit made a guy hungry.

"That's a long story." Jason winced at the deflection. He'd always hated it when people used it on him. After all, he'd asked the question, hadn't he? He was obviously willing to listen. "I'll tell you later, though."

Dick nodded slowly. "Then how long?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure. A year, maybe? Year and a half? It was all pretty fuzzy at the beginning. I only got back to Gotham a few months ago."

"Why didn't you come find me?"

Jason froze in the middle of retrieving a water bottle, memory flashing white hot through him. "Thought that was supposed to be your job, Dick."

Dick jerked back as though he'd been slapped. Now he wiped at the tears on his face, roughly drying them with the edge of his shirt. Guilt flooded Jason.

He'd been thirteen when he died. Dick wasn't eighteen then. He hadn't abandoned him. If anything, Jason abandoned *him* when he died.

But there was that little part of him that was still in that warehouse. That part of him, that kid, still hoped he could be saved. And more than the police, more than Batman, that kid had hoped for his big brother to be the one to do it.

None of that was Dick's fault. The rebuke had just slipped out, Jason

forgetting to think of words before he spoke them. “I didn’t mean that,” he said, knowing even as he said it that the damage was done.

Dick shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. You’re still right.” He renewed his efforts at stopping the tears as he met Jason’s eyes. “I’m sorry, Jason.” His voice broke. “God, I’m so fucking sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Jason was not built to hold these types of conversations at all, much less while he was still trying to get this stupid injury taken care of. He used the water to clean it, then used the last of it to take a few painkillers before setting up the suture kit.

Dick looked like he was struggling to find a way to reason why Jason was wrong. Either that, or he was constipated.

“You’re not constipated, are you? ‘Cause that’d just be sad right now.”

A laugh burst out of Dick. “What? Why the fuck would you say that?” he wheezed, hiccuping through the tears still stubbornly falling.

“You look like it. *Motherfucker* ,” Jason grit out, pushing the needle through his skin.

Dick stepped forward, panic flashing across his face. “Can I help?”

“Do you know how to do stitches?” Dick shook his head. Oh, well. Worth a shot. “Then no. I’ve got it. You can help me get some food later, though? Does Batburger give you an employee’s discount?”

“Yeah, actually,” Dick said. *Awesome* . Jason grit his teeth and started the next stitch. “Hey, did you know where I was this whole time?”

“What, like from when I first came back, or when we bumped into each other?”

“When you first got back.”

“Nah. I just figured you’d moved on and kept going with my own plans. Once I saw you on the roof, though, I started keeping an eye on you. Love what you did with your hair, by the way. Real tough and edgy.”

“Shut up.” Dick lifted a hand self consciously to fiddle with the blue tips of his hair. “And we never really moved on, Jay. I’ve missed you the whole time you’ve been gone.”

Whoops, that was a bit *too much* emotion for Jason right now, thank

you very much. “Okay, sure. Not sure why you didn’t go get Tim, though.”

Guilt weighed Dick down. His shoulders slumped and his eyes turned to the floor. “I was stupid. And selfish. I thought he’d be better off staying where he was.”

Jason looked up incredulously, only to wince as he finished the sixth suture. Three more to go. “With his parents? Come on, Dick, you’re smarter than that.”

“Apparently, I’m not.” Self loathing oozed from Dick’s voice like acid. “I was an idiot for leaving him there, and I only realized that when we found each other.” He paused. “He’s been following Batman, you know. Since everything happened.”

“Oh, *shit* .” Jason stiffened. Tim—little Timmy, who Jason could hoist up onto his shoulders like he weighed nothing, was running around Gotham following vigilantes? Oh, he was so not okay. Jason had already figured that the couple of times he saw Tim visiting his grave. There was definitely something wrong with his little brother. Not wrong like *ew, broken pieces, that’s gross and we have to get rid of it* . Wrong like, *what happened to make you so empty?*

It hurt, hearing Tim’s voice the way it was now. Flat and tired, speaking for necessity and not for the joy of communicating, of being able to say things that people could hear and turn into a conversation that could spark laughter and memories and happiness. Jason had to fight with himself to keep from walking up to his little brother right then and hugging him until he smiled again.

God, he missed Tim’s smile.

Jason tied off the final suture and cut the thread. Once he covered the spot with a bandage, he eased himself upright, leaning on the wall behind him.

“Hey,” he started. “Do you think I could—or you could—can we talk to him?”

Now that he had one brother back, the urge to find Tim and just be near him again was almost painful. They would never have their childhoods back. The games and the laughter and the innocence had burned along with Wayne Manor. But they had this. They had each other, three brothers who’d been to hell and back—literally—, and it didn’t seem like there was anything keeping them apart. They had

whatever they could be now, and Jason was desperate to find out what that was. It had been so long since he'd had a family.

Dick tilted his head, confused. "Was that not a given?"

"I wasn't sure."

"He's your brother too, Jay. He's the only one who could stop you from seeing him. But I really doubt he'll want to."

"Oh." Jason smiled. "Alright, then."

He couldn't wait to see his little brother.

Chapter 9: Little Bird, Back in the Nest

Chapter Notes

> THE FINAL REUNION!!!!! And yes, there will be a time when they find out Bruce is Batman and all that, but that's not gonna count because it's not gonna be a fluffy moment. Song for this one is Hey Brother by Avicii. I also want to say thanks for all the amazing comments!! Y'all are keeping me motivated to write this fic, and I'm really excited about the way it's turning out. Enjoy the chapter!
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: self harm urges

Dick's call was nothing short of cryptic. Tim had been dozing, unable to keep his eyes open to focus on the code he was learning, when the ringtone pierced the air. Since he and Dick reunited, Tim had taken to leaving it on so he could hear the texts. Otherwise, he could go days without noticing Dick had called, if he was absorbed in a project.

When he picked up, Dick had skipped his usual *hey, Timmy, how's your day?* and went straight for, "Can you come to my apartment? Like, now?"

Tim pretended the lack of greeting didn't send a stab of hurt through him. "Yeah," he said immediately, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Why?"

"I'll explain when you get here."

"Is everything okay?"

A long moment stretched between Tim's question and Dick's answer. "Yeah," he said. "Just…please get here."

Then he hung up. For a moment, Tim stared at the phone in his hand, shaken by the abruptness. It was so unlike Dick. Maybe something *was* wrong. Tim was the son of millionaires, after all. If someone found out that Tim and Dick were connected, they could be using him to lure Tim into a hostage situation.

Tim snorted. If only those people knew he spent months at a time alone in an empty Manor. They'd have a field day. Of course, they'd never get to him—not with the extra security measures Tim himself

had implemented—, but it was funny nonetheless.

If someone was trying to kidnap Tim, they weren't going to have an easy time.

Tim had Dick's address in his phone. He accessed the security cameras around and in the building to check for anything strange. Nothing unusual stuck out to him.Of course, seeing as there were no cameras that would let him see inside Dick's apartment, that really didn't mean much.

Unless…Tim could hack into the camera on Dick's phone…

He shook his head to himself, jerking it sharply to the side a few times to make the thought go away. That was a breach of Dick's privacy. Tim would never do that to him.

When he got dressed, Tim put on his usual jeans, t-shirt, and jacket. Instead of sneakers, he picked out a pair of boots with a thick rubber sole and a stiff toe. They'd hurt more if he had to kick people. He added a small pocket knife to his backpack.

What else could he do? A panic button. Tim didn't have time to do anything really good, but he slapped together a barely functional panic button on his phone. If he tapped it, the police would instantly be notified with his name and location. Not great, but it'd have to do.

When he got to Dick's apartment building, Tim made one last choice. Instead of going inside and up the stairs like a normal person, he decided to scale the fire escape. It'd give him the opportunity to check through Dick's window for any intruders. If Dick thought it was weird, Tim would remind him that he did gymnastics on roofs at night and liked ketchup on his eggs.

But there was nothing wrong inside Dick's apartment. The living room had a couch facing away from Tim, and a kitchenette in the corner by the door. A table with four chairs took up the middle of the room. A small hallway led off to where Tim assumed Dick's bedroom was.

Dick himself was leaning on the counter with his arms crossed. His lips were moving, but Tim couldn't see anyone else in the room. He knocked quietly on the window. Dick jumped violently, releasing a string of swears Tim could hear through the window. He covered his mouth to staunch the giggles.

When he realized it was Tim outside, Dick's eyes bulged. He strode

across the room and shoved the window open. It stuck and screeched in protest, but eventually it yielded.

“Tim, why the hell are you on the fire escape?” Dick hissed, looking out for any neighbors who might have heard the ruckus.

“You sounded weird on the phone. I wanted to make sure no one was forcing you to call me.” Tim shrugged.

“No one was forcing me to call you. I was just in a hurry.”

“Were you dying?”

“Of course I wasn’t dying!”

“Then you could’ve at least said bye before you hung up.”

Dick had the good sense to look chastised. Tim, however, stiffened when a head covered in jet black hair popped up from the couch. “Jesus, Dickie, you hung up on the baby bird? That’s just rude.” His voice was deep, but not deep enough for Tim to reasonably call him an adult.

Had he just called him baby bird? No one ever called him that. No one but the Waynes. The nicknames had spawned from a nickname Dick’s mom had given him, Robin. Bruce used it often, and the bird theme had leached out to all three brothers. Little wing. Baby bird. No one had ever used those nicknames except for Bruce and Dick. And…

Tim looked closer. There was a tiny scar beneath the kid’s eye. He cocked his head as Tim looked, and their eyes met. Recognition flashed through the kid’s gaze, followed by sadness and…love? Did Tim even know what love looked like anymore?

“Jason,” he said.

Jason blinked. “Damn, Dick,” he said. “You said he was smart, not a goddamn genius.”

Tim blushed. Dick made a series of flapping gestures at Jason. “No swearing!” he protested.

“It’s not like I haven’t heard them before.” Without waiting for Dick’s invitation, Tim climbed through the window. The linoleum floor bowed beneath his feet. Still in shock and numb as always, Tim walked around the couch to see his brother.

Jason was tall. Really tall. Gone was the stunted growth and skinny frame of malnutrition, replaced by a tall, muscled build that had Jason folding his legs to keep them from spilling off the couch. He had on blue jeans and a loose red t-shirt. His arms and hands were littered with scars, big and small alike, that hadn't been there four years ago. But when he grinned at Tim, it looked just like it did when he was twelve.

Tim launched himself at Jason, wrapping his arms around his neck and burying his face in his shoulder. The moment he did, Jason let out a pained gasp. Tim flinched away.

There were no obvious injuries on his brother, but Tim knew that didn't mean much. "What happened?" he asked.

"It's nothing bad," Jason promised.

"Excuse me?" Dick interrupted, smacking his hands down on the back of the couch. "You were *shot* . That's bad!"

"You were *shot* ?" Tim repeated. In response, Jason just lifted his shirt, revealing clean white bandages wrapped around his torso. A chill ran down Tim's spine as he imagined the wound underneath.

"See, Dick? You scared him." Jason gave Dick a glare with no heat and turned to Tim. His voice softened to a comforting tone. "Seriously, it's not that bad, Timmy. Promise. The bullet only grazed me. It didn't even hit anything important. You can hug me, I promise. Just slower this time." When Tim continued to hesitate, he held out his arms. "Come on, Timmers."

Carefully, Tim stepped close again and wrapped his arms around Jason's neck. Jason hugged him back, pulling him as close as he could given their awkward position. He kissed the top of Tim's head. "I missed you, baby bird."

Voice muffled by Jason's shirt, Tim replied, "I missed you too."

The silence lasted for a few minutes. Then Jason said, "Dick, I know you want in on this. Come on."

"I thought you'd never ask." Dick's arms wrapped around both of them as he bent over the back of the couch.

For a long time, they stayed that way. His brothers' body heat warmed Tim up after the cold bike ride from Bristol. It reminded him of nights

in winter when all three of them were sleeping at the Manor. The three of them would be outside all day, playing in the snow that covered the Manor's massive lawn. They held snowball fights and built snowmen, and when the sun came down and Alfred made them come in, they'd all end up in the living room. There, Alfred would bring them hot cocoa while they sat pressed together on the couch, either watching a movie or playing an intense game of Mario Kart. They never ended up going to their rooms those nights. They just fell asleep, heads on shoulders and limbs sprawling everywhere. Tim had a secret suspicion that Alfred just liked seeing them happy like that.

Until he'd found Dick again, Tim could count on one hand the amount of times he'd had physical contact with another human being since that night. When they separated, he had to stop himself from sighing. But there was an important question he had to ask.

"How?"

Neither of his brothers asked what he was talking about. Dick looked at Jason, whose face had settled into a grimace.

"You might want to get a seat," he said. "It's a long story."

Tim and Dick ended up sitting on the floor, leaning against the coffee table. Jason stayed on the couch, with an expression that suggested he didn't like lying down for this discussion. Nevertheless, he began to tell his story.

The first part, Tim already knew. On October fifth, three years ago, the Joker had kidnapped Jason off the streets. There was no particular reason that he'd been taken, nothing that drew the Joker to him specifically. Jason had just been the one unlucky kid in a city with thousands.

The Joker had dressed Jason in a Batman suit and beat him to death with a crowbar. Then, for good measure, blew up the warehouse he'd done it in. Batman had only arrived in time to find Jason's body.

It wasn't part of any big scheme. The Joker didn't kill Jason for any other purpose to hurt Batman, who had no idea who he was.

The rest of it, Tim heard for the first time.

Six months after his death, Jason woke up in the Lazarus Pit, a pool of

water controlled by the League of Assassins with the power to reverse death. Jason was alive again, but the Pit had left him with an urge to kill. It demanded an unpayable debt for Jason's life, and the price was blood. In his murderous state, Jason was a loose cannon, so the leader of the League, Ra's al Ghul, trained Jason to control the bloodlust. In the process, he turned him into one of the League's most deadly fighters. But Jason had never been one for following orders. He ran away. Ra's' daughter, Talia, had grown to care about him in an almost motherly way. She had ensured that Jason would not be pursued.

Which led to here. Tim could see where this story was going, but he stayed quiet, entranced by Jason's words.

Jason came back to Gotham. When he was training with the League, he had an epiphany: Batman may care about Gotham. He may be trying to save it. But at the end of the day, he would prioritize his moral code over stopping a villain, and that was why he would never win.

Donning the Red Hood, Jason took control of the drug trade. He began to operate in Crime Alley as a vigilante, stopping the sorts of crimes that Batman never noticed. Domestic abuse. Muggings. Neglect. And it was *working* .

When Jason reached his encounter with Batman, Tim piped up. "I saw you," he said.

Both Jason and Dick's heads swiveled to stare at him. "Say what now?" Jason asked.

"I was there, on the catwalk. I saw you guys fighting. Well, not *fighting* , fighting, I guess, but you know what I mean."

"Timmy," Dick said, "Why were you in that building?" Jason's face had gone pale. Tim came to the abrupt realization that maybe he was not supposed to tell them about that. It was too late to backtrack, though.

He fidgeted with the marble trap he'd brought, tilting it so the marble rolled back and forth in its plastic case. "I was following Batman. I always follow Batman. Sometimes I take pictures, and sometimes I can help him with cases. He doesn't know it's me, though."

"Tim," Dick said. He looked horrified. "Do you have any idea how *dangerous* that is?"

Tim shrugged. “Honestly, I didn’t really care.”

Jason made a pained noise. He shifted on the couch, pushing himself up on one elbow. “Did you see me kill them?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, *fuck* .” He dropped back to his side, eyes shut tight. “I’m so sorry, Tim. You never should have seen that.”

“Why not? You just explained it all to us. If we were mad that you killed people, we wouldn’t still be here.” Jason and Dick exchanged a glance, and Tim felt that separation again. He didn’t know what they were saying to each other. He couldn’t read the words hanging unspoken in the air. “What?”

“It’s—” Jason and Dick exchanged another glance, and Jason sighed. “It’s not important right now. What is important is that you don’t do it again. It’s dangerous enough at night in this city, even if you aren’t following the fucking Batman.” Dick rolled his eyes at the curse.

The demand didn’t phase Tim much. He hadn’t gone out since he and Dick met again, anyway. “Fine.”

Surprise showed on both his brothers’ faces. It was enough to make Tim grin. It really was funny to confuse them.

“Alright, then,” Dick said slowly, still watching Tim like he was about to scream ‘PSYCHE’ and run off out the window. “I think that’s enough for one night, to be honest.”

“Agreed.” Jason yawned. “I’m so tired I might actually be able to sleep for once.”

“Same.” Dick stood and stretched. “I’ll call a cab to take you home, Tim.”

“I don’t need one,” Tim said. “I biked here.”

And they were back to Dick and Jason staring at him like he was crazy. “You did *what* ?” Dick asked.

Tim didn’t get why they were upset. He’d been doing it for as long as he’d known them. Whenever he wanted to go out and his parents were home, they told him to bike. It was normal. “What? I don’t have a car. You said to come here fast, and a cab would’ve taken too long. It

wasn't a problem."

"Bristol is a thirty minute drive away on a dark road!" Dick looked like he was going to hyperventilate. Running his hands through his hair, he paced in a circle. "You could have been hit by a car!"

"No one drives on those roads anymore," Tim replied. "I was fine."

Dick opened his mouth, but Jason stopped him. "Dick, drop it. It won't change anything."

"Thanks, Jay." Tim hugged him again. This time, Jason held him just a little tighter. "I hope you get better soon." He turned for the window, but Jason grabbed his arm.

"Not so fast, baby bird. I told Dick to drop it 'cause chewing you out won't change anything, but you're not biking home by yourself."

"Well then how am I supposed to get home?" Tim asked, agitated. Agitation prickled along his skin. This wasn't what was supposed to be happening. He hadn't planned this.

"You're not. You're staying here." One look at Dick's face told Tim he wouldn't be changing his mind. The prickling sensation increased. He had the urge to hit his head against a wall.

Fine," he muttered, scuffing his shoe against the ground.

The urge persisted even as Dick dragged his mattress out to the living room. They pushed the coffee table against the wall and put the mattress next to the couch, then piled as many blankets and pillows on as they could find. Jason took a few for himself. He was staying on the couch to keep from jostling his stitches. Dick and Tim lay down on the mattress, wrapping up in blankets. Tim piled as many as he could on top of him, trying to replicate the feeling of his weighted blanket at home. He already knew he wasn't going to sleep tonight. Sighing, Tim drew the blankets tighter around him.

Lying still with nothing to distract him, his eyes drifted to Jason, who was already asleep. *He's alive* , Tim told himself. *He's alive, he's alive, he's alive* . Nothing stirred in his chest. No warmth filled his heart. No smile broke out on his face, setting his eyes alight with joy. Tim still felt nothing. Only now, staring at the sleeping face of his long lost brother, did Tim really start to hate himself for being empty.

Chapter 10: Lonely Bird, Not Alone

Chapter Notes

> So this chapter might not be the best, I'm sleeping at my friend's house and my braincells have been dying slowly, as they do. I also can't think of a song for this one, so if you want to suggest one in the comments go ahead! I don't think there's any CW's for this chapter, so enjoy!

The fire was back, but this time, Dick was strapped to his childhood bed.

Leather straps held him down. Heat turned the metal buckles white-hot, burning like brands against Dick's skin. They held him down by his arms and legs, leaving his head free so he could watch the flames coming closer.

Outside his door, his brothers were crying.

"Dick! Where are you?" Jason yelled, voice high with desperation. Dick could hear footsteps pounding in the hallway, circling back and forth but never leaving.

"Dick, help!" Tim, farther away. "I'm stuck! I can't get out!"

Their voices surrounded him as Dick fought against his restraints. They bled through the walls and echoed, until his brothers' pain was all around him.

"Dick, let me get you out!"

"Dick, you promised you'd help me!"

"Just run!" Dick tried to yell back. He struggled with all his might against his restraints, but they only seemed to get tighter. The leather burned rings into his skin. Dick forced back a cry of pain. "Leave me and go!"

"No!" they replied in unison. Dick could feel himself crying, but the tears evaporated the moment they formed.

"Dick!" Tim was calling, again and again, louder and louder. A hand landed on Dick's shoulder. He struggled harder.

“Dick, please, wake up.”

Unlike the last nightmare, Dick regained consciousness slowly. The hand on his shoulder was decidedly real, and he held onto it, fighting to open his eyes. When he did, they were crusty with sleep. Above him, he could make out the blurry form of Tim.

“Timmy?” he muttered.

“Yeah. You were having a nightmare. I think you were, at least.”

“Why aren’t you asleep?” Pushing himself up on his elbows, Dick stared unseeingly at Tim.

“Couldn’t. What was it about?”

Dick dragged a hand down his face. “Oh, you know, *trauma* .” He made a halfhearted attempt at jazz hands.

Tim tilted his head. “So, the fire?”

Oh, damn. Dick hadn’t expected him to figure it out that fast. “Yeah. Yeah, the fire.” The scar on his side throbbed.

Nightmares were a constant for Dick. They had been ever since his parents died—his real parents. Then, they’d been filled with bones breaking and screaming crowds, and Dick was never able to reach them in time. Every night, Dick rewatched his parents’ deaths in technicolor. After the fire, Bruce was added to the cast of his nightmares. Then Jason. Sometimes, when he saw him on TV at some gala or other, Tim appeared.

His brothers’ presence had been enough to let Dick fall asleep, but it clearly hadn’t stopped the nightmares.

Wordlessly, Dick reached out. Tim shuffled over and allowed himself to be hugged tightly, wrapping his arms around Dick in return. Dick tried to memorize the feeling of Tim’s warmth as he watched Jason over his shoulder. *See, they’re alive. This is what it feels like to hug your brother. This is what it looks like when they’re safe.*

The longer he looked, though, the more obvious it was that Jason wasn’t doing well either. Sweat shone on his forehead. His face twitched into microexpressions of fear and pain.

“Jason,” Dick whispered at him. Tim shifted, twisting to look over his

shoulder. “ *Jay* .”

Jason’s eyes flew open. His gaze locked on Dick’s chest rising and falling rapidly, but making no audible noise. The room stayed frozen for a few tense moments. Then he said, “So y’all have nightmares too?”

Dick nodded. Tim said, “I couldn’t sleep.”

“That’s totally fair, baby bird.” Groaning, Jason rolled over until he fell the few inches between the couch and the mattress. He reached out with grabby hands. “Hugs, you fucks. I haven’t had positive physical contact in years, I’m touch starved as hell.”

Dick was only too happy to oblige, and so was Tim. He ended up sandwiched between the older two. Silence pressed down with a comforting weight as the three of them just breathed.

Eventually, though, Dick accepted that he wouldn’t be able to sleep. He rolled away from the hug. “I’m hungry. Do you guys want anything?”

“Yes, please,” Jason said. Tim remained quiet, avoiding eye contact. A pang of concern passed through Dick, another reminder that something wasn’t quite right. There was nothing he could really do about it right now, though, so he went to the kitchenette to pull something together.

There wasn’t much in his fridge. Dick hadn’t been shopping in a few weeks, and he tended to live off of whatever he could shove in the microwave. Once upon a time, he’d enjoyed cooking. Alfred was a good teacher. He’d promised to teach Dick how to make cookies like he did. That never ended up happening, of course, and as Dick got older, he didn’t have time to devote to cooking.

Still, he had a few pots and pans. Dick grabbed eggs and cheese, setting about making scrambled eggs.

When they were younger, Tim had always had a specific taste in foods. It was less of a lot of things he disliked, and more of a limited menu of things he could eat. Tim was never able to vocalize exactly why he ate such a limited variety, but no one questioned it. It was clear that Tim didn’t want to be difficult. He never asked for specific things. If they were eating something he couldn’t, he just wouldn’t say anything and not eat it. Dick made a note to himself to stock up on Tim’s safe foods.

“Hey, baby bird, do you still like eggs on toast?” he called. Tim looked up at him with eyes wide in surprise.

“Yeah,” he said softly. Jason tilted his head, assessing. The moment he remembered, he and Dick exchanged a look. They’d make sure Tim had things to eat. “Can I have coffee?”

Dick choked on spit. “Baby bird—” he checked the clock “—it is two in the morning. *No* , you cannot have coffee?”

“Why not?”

Dick swore, every time those words left Tim’s mouth, he lost two years of his lifespan. Sometime soon, they were going to have to have a conversation about the bare minimum of self care. “Because I said so.” He stuck the bread in the toaster and moved the eggs from the pan to a plate to keep them from burning. “I’ve got chocolate milk if you want that.”

He looked back over his shoulder to find Tim staring him down. Dick hadn’t realized that there could be so much determination in Tim’s little face. It was scary, especially because Tim hadn’t blinked in over twenty seconds. Jason had his lips pressed together, shaking with suppressed laughter. *Traitor.* Dick glared at him.

“Can I have coffee.” Tim spoke in monotone.

“No.”

“Then chocolate milk is fine.” Tim let himself fall back on the bed in defeat. “I hope you know you’re being mean.”

“I don’t, actually,” Dick chirped at him, returning to the eggs. The toast was done, and he started dividing the eggs between the slices. “I’m making sure you don’t give yourself a heart attack.”

Now that he had an idea of how fucked up Tim’s self care abilities were, Dick went back to the fridge. Tim could eat grapes, he knew, and there was an almost empty bag behind the milk. He grabbed it and put some on each plate, most of them going to Tim.

Returning to the bed, he passed out the plates and handed over Tim’s chocolate milk before sitting cross-legged and shoving his own toast in his mouth.

None of them wanted to talk about it, he could tell. They just ate their

food in silence, until Jason stood up. “I’m gonna get coffee.”

“Ah—no you’re not.” Dick grabbed his arm. “You’re not allowed to have coffee either.”

Jason turned halfway back towards him with an offended expression. “And why not?”

“Because you’re six-freaking-teen, and neither of you are having coffee until it’s a normal hour to be awake.”

Jason put his hands on his hips. “Dickiebird. I’ve come back from the dead. I am a vigilante crime lord who controls Gotham’s drug trade. People are *afraid* of me. And you mean to tell me that I can’t have *coffee* because I’m *sixteen* ?”

Tim smirked. “If I can’t have it, you definitely can’t have it.”

“Bitch.”

“Language!” Dick squawked.

“Just curse!” Tim said.

“No! You will have a curse free environment! And none of you are having coffee! That’s final!” Dick said, shoving the last bite of his eggs into his mouth as punctuation. Jason sulkily sat back down, eating his toast. Tim had already finished his, grapes and all.

None of them ever ended up falling back asleep. They just sat together, waiting for the sun to rise. Dick could remember nights like this on his own, sitting with his thoughts and all the lights on, memory after memory playing in his head.

With Jason and Tim here, the thoughts didn’t go away, but at least he wasn’t alone with them.

Chapter 11: Lost Bird, Living Free

Chapter Notes

I'd like to inform everyone that I've misspelled Tim's name as Time so many times that my autocorrect is picking up on it. ANYWAY here's the chapter, a good song is Alone Together by Fall Out Boy. Also, thank you again for all the comments because they're awesome and I love seeing them.

No CW's for this chapter.

Enjoy! :)

Tim had wanted to see Jason's safehouse. To be fair, there were several of them, but Jason could tell he meant the one Dick had followed him to. The guy had majorly exaggerated how cool it was. If Tim wanted to see something actually sophisticated, and Jason didn't want him to continue living, he would've offered to show him the League's headquarters.

As it was, Jason felt very strongly about *both* of his brothers staying alive. The League, and anyone else, wouldn't come near them. Not on his watch.

So, the three of them headed out. Yesterday, Jason had rode with Dick on his motorcycle, leaving the one Dick stole behind. Today, Tim rode behind Jason while he drove the motorcycle, and Dick was taking a cab to a place he could walk from.

When Jason had first offered to drive Tim, Dick had refused.

"You were shot *literally yesterday* , Jaybird," he'd said. "You're nowhere near healed enough to be driving."

Jason had given him a look. "Dude, I've done crazier things with worse injuries. I'll be fine."

Both Dick and Tim had looked more than a little worried about that statement. Okay, maybe it wasn't fair to bring up the shit he'd dealt with. But, still. Jason could drive a fucking motorcycle, and Tim didn't look like he'd seen sunlight in months. The kid could use some time outdoors when it wasn't the middle of the night.

Riding through the streets, Tim's stick-thin arms wrapped around his

waist, Jason knew he was right. Tim, it turned out, was an adrenaline junkie.

Which, okay, Jason should have figured that out from the fact that he *stalked Batman* . Give him a break. He hadn't had healthy social interaction in years.

Tim was yelling into the wind. At the speed they were going, the wind blew the words right back into his face. Up front, Jason could just barely make out the faint sound of laughter. It was the kind of laugh Tim used to have when they were kids. With the emptiness of his eyes, Jason had worried that that laugh was gone forever.

"Can we go faster?" Tim called. Jason laughed.

"Baby bird, we're ten miles over the speed limit. Dick'll kill us."

"He doesn't have to know."

Jason debated. On the one hand, being a responsible brother was a good idea. On the other, there were no other cars on the coastal road to the warehouse, and this was the happiest he'd seen Tim since he came back to Gotham. "I guess you're right!" He sped up another few miles, and behind him, Tim let out an exhilarated whoop.

God, Jason had missed this. Him and Tim, doing stupid shit that Dick would find out about and pretend to be mad at them for, but always ended up joining in on. As much as he'd liked being nurturing and trying to teach his little brothers responsibility, Dick was a kid too. He could leave the parenting to Bruce.

Things were different now, of course. Jason could see Dick struggling to handle his guilt over everything the past four years had done to them. He wished he could grab the idiot's shoulders, look into his eyes, and beam the message *none of this is your fault* into his head. The Manor had been no one's fault. Tim's pain was from his parents being absolute shit. And Jason's pain…they all knew who to blame for that.

He wanted Dick to know that just because he was the only adult now, it didn't mean he had to be their parent. They were *brothers* . With brothers, there was no one person to raise the others. They were a tangle of similarities and differences, with lessons to learn from and teach to everyone else. No one was in charge. They were all just… there. The burden wasn't meant to rest on one pair of shoulders when there were two more standing beside them.

Dick hadn't arrived yet when they pulled up to the warehouse, which was fair seeing as Jason and Tim had broken the speed limit 80% of the way there. Tim hopped off the motorcycle and hurried towards the door. The smile on his face only lasted a few moments before it dissolved and his shoulders sagged once again, but Jason committed it to memory.

By the time Jason had put the bike somewhere safe and turned back to the door, Tim had already gone inside.

The reason this was concerning was that the door had been closed with a combination lock.

Jesus fucking Christ.

"Baby bird, how the fuck did you get in?" Jason called, pulling the door shut behind him and turning on the lights, which apparently Tim had not found. The warehouse lit up, revealing its full glory. Of course, it was the kind of glory you'd assign to a shitty gas station that had a clean bathroom, but still. Glory.

"I picked the lock. It's on the table if you want it." Tim was over by the training mat, examining the weapons. If he managed to hurt himself—though at this point, Jason wouldn't be surprised if he ended up knowing how to use all of them—Dick would kill him, so he hustled over to supervise. *Good big brothering, Jay.*

Tim had bypassed the guns and long ranged weapons(Jason met a guy with a bow and arrow in Star City. It was worth learning), and gone for a bo staff. He wasn't doing anything with it. He just held it with both hands like he was memorizing every detail.

"Am I interrupting something?" In response to Tim's glare, Jason leaned on the wall. "Do you know how to use it?"

Tim shook his head.

"Well, that one's too big for you." Jason reached over his head for one a few inches shorter and made of a lighter wood. He traded with Tim, who observed the new staff with the same awe-like intensity. "This is a good one to start with. Here, I'll show you how to break a bone."

They did not end up getting to the breaking bones stage. Jason was still walking Tim through the right foot positions when Dick arrived.

Part of the reason Jason chose this warehouse was because of the door. It stuck, so if someone opened it while he was sleeping, the screech would wake him up. In this case, it caused both of them to jump.

Dick smirked. “I would’ve thought you didn’t scare that easily, Jay.”

Jason flipped him off. “I was teaching Tim to do violence.”

“What?”

“He’s showing me how to use a bo staff,” Tim clarified, copying the most recent stance Jason had shown him. He had a talent for mimicking Jason on the first try, down to the smallest detail. When Jason showed him something, an analytical gleam would appear in his gaze. For a few moments, he’d watch Jason, then replicate it perfectly. It was impressive.

With a twinge of protective fear, Jason thought about how interested Ra’s would be in getting his hands on someone with Tim’s talents.

But he wasn’t going to let that happen. So it was fine.

Dick was watching Tim with a warm gaze. “That’s awesome, Timmy. It looks like you’re picking it up pretty fast.” He exchanged a glance with Jason, a silent *he looks alive again* . Jason fought back a grin, because Dick was right. There was a spark in Tim’s eyes. It was the same wonderstruck interest he’d had when he first picked up photography, and they both knew he still loved that hobby.

To change the subject, Jason gestured widely towards the other weapons. “You want to learn something too, Robin dearest?”

Dick practically melted at the nickname. “No, I’m good.”

He absolutely wanted a hug right now. Without mentioning it, Jason went over and leaned against Dick, throwing an arm around his shoulder. “You sure? We could find something fun for you to flip around with. Maybe the throwing stars?”

“Definitely not. I don’t think knives would be my thing.” Dick put his arm around Jason and reached out to ruffle Tim’s hair. Not for the first time, Jason noticed how greasy it was. The strands were separated into clumps, pressed flat against Tim’s head.

Jason knew the signs of depression. He knew the way it could affect

people. So when he asked, he made sure to keep his voice gentle and judgment-free. “Timmy, do you know when you last showered?”

“Uhhhhh…” Tim’s face scrunched up in contemplation. “I’m not really sure? I just kind of forgot about it. Why?” His expression turned worried. Shrinking into himself, he asked, “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, of course not, baby bird.” Jason put an arm around Tim, drawing him closer to him and Dick. “No one’s upset with you if you forgot. But you might feel a bit better if you showered. Being clean and shit feels nice. I’ve got one here you can use if you want.”

Tim contemplated the offer for a few moments. “Yeah, okay. Where is it?”

Jason showed Tim the bathroom. He grabbed him a towel and a new change of clothes, then left him to shower while he and Dick talked.

“There’s something wrong here,” Dick said. His tone had turned heavy with concern. “He’s not doing well.”

“I mean, can you blame him?” Jason asked. “His parents are shit and he’s been stuck in that house on his own for years.” Dick flinched. “And that’s *not your fault* . Seriously, Dick. None of this is your fault. You’re a kid too.”

“‘M not a kid,” Dick grumbled.

“You’re nineteen. That’s still a teenager, Robin,” Jason said. “We’re not responsible for anything that’s happened to each other. What matters now is that we’re back together.”

Dick made a face like he wanted to argue, but ultimately conceded. Good. Jason was absolutely capable of going back and forth with him, but he really didn’t want to. Not now, Not about this. “Still. What are we going to do about Tim?”

“Well, the first thing we’re gonna do is not talk about him when he’s not in the room.” All three of them had had enough choices made for them in their lives; they didn’t need to start doing it to each other. “We’ll talk to him about it soon. Until then, we’ll do what we were gonna do anyway: we’ll look out for him, just like he’s looking out for us, and we’re looking out for each other. Because—” Jason headbutted Dick lightly in the forehead “—we’re brothers.”

The corner of Dick' mouth twitched upwards. “Yeah,” he agreed. “We're brothers.”

“Great. Glad that's cleared up. Now.” Clapping his hands, Jason went back to the training mat. “Show me how to do a backflip.”

A startled laugh escaped Dick. “What?”

“When we were younger you were teaching me.” Jason shrugged. “I still want to learn. I'm even kind of flexible now.” To prove it, he arched into a backbend.

Dick nodded approvingly. “Not bad.” Following Jason onto the mat, he went into his own backbend, then did a walkover so he was back on his feet. “I'm better, though.”

“Show off.” Jason couldn't get himself out of the backbend gracefully, so he just let himself collapse onto the floor. “Still. Teach me. I missed learning gymnastics from the famous Flying Grayson.”

A sad look flickered over Dick's face. Whether it was for his parents or for the last time Jason had asked him about acrobatics, Jason couldn't tell. “I missed teaching you.”

At that point, the bathroom door creaked open. Tim padded out in socks and an oversized pair of pajamas Jason had lent him. He still had on his jacket, even though it looked uncomfortably warm over the long sleeved t-shirt. Jason would have to ask about that. He'd also have to remember to grab some food that Tim was comfortable eating.

“Hey, baby bird,” Dick called. “Feel better?”

“Yeah, actually,” Tim said. “I didn't notice how gross I was until I wasn't anymore.” It was true, technically. Even dripping wet, his hair was in noticeably better shape, and the smell that had been following him around was gone. It was also, Jason realized, the first time he had ever seen Tim in clothes that weren't wrinkled as hell.

“Awesome,” Jason said. “Speaking of feeling better, I'm hungry. I don't think I've got any food you guys like here, so…Batburger?” He tilted his head towards Dick who made a face at him.

“Batburger sounds *great* , Jay. You're paying, though.”

“Fine with me. Tim, do you still like their fries?” That was one of the

things Tim had always been okay to eat. A lot of their family fast food runs had been to Batburger when they'd been at the Manor.

"I do." Tim perked up. "Oh, and they have coffee milkshakes!" Dick made a show of facepalming. "If you try to stop me from getting one, I will break into their kitchen and make it myself."

Dick gave Jason a *help* look, but Jason laughed. "Don't worry, Timmy. I'll buy both of us milkshakes. He can't keep us from our coffee if we aren't at his house."

"You two are gonna have heart attacks before you turn twenty," Dick said.

"Worth it," Tim snarked. Jason snorted.

"Come on. Dick, you can ride the motorcycle you stole yesterday. We're gonna race."

"We are *not* racing," Dick said. Jason responded by grabbing Tim's hand and his keys and running for the door.

"Sounds like someone who's scared of losing!"

Dick's footsteps sounded behind them as he gave chase, and Jason and Tim burst into maniacal giggles. They rounded the building to where Jason had parked the bike. Wheeling it out to the road, they jumped on in time for Jason to flip Dick off as he appeared with his own ride. Then, they sped off at fifteen miles over the speed limit.

Tim was back to smiling. Dick was going to kill them. Jason was having the time of his life, and already thinking about teaching Tim to drive. Being alive was starting to feel *great* .

Chapter 12: Little Bird, Breaking Out

Chapter Notes

I LOVED writing this chapter! I always like doing action scenes, which is probably part of why I love writing this fic so much. I probably also love writing this fic because my friend told me the tropes that I always have are vigilantes and found family, so...

ANYWAYS song rec for this chapter is Can't be Erased by JT Music

Content Warnings for this chapter: blood, guns

Thank you all so much for the comments, they make my day every time I see one. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later that night, Jason went out on patrol. Tim and Dick didn't want to go back to Dick's apartment—there was an unofficial agreement that Tim was staying at Dick's. Tim couldn't say when during the day it appeared, but it had—, so they were still at Jason's safehouse.

When he was getting ready to leave, Tim had noticed him put on a contact lens and an earpiece.

"What're those for?" he'd asked, wandering over to inspect the guns that Jason hadn't yet holstered. He didn't know anything about them, but they were cool.

"They record what I see," Jason said, grabbing the gun before Tim's outstretched hand could reach it. "And you're not touching these without my supervision."

Tim frowned. "What about the earpiece?"

"Records audio." Tapping his ear, Jason holstered the other gun. "It helps me gather evidence in case I need to make a case or send something to the police." Snorting, he added, "Useless as it may be."

He wasn't wrong. The police in Gotham were so corrupt that they weren't much better than your average goon for hire. Tim only knew of one, Jim Gordon, who was even remotely trustworthy. Batman trusted him to help on cases, which was basically divine approval.

Whenever Tim found something for the police to handle, Commissioner Gordon was his first choice(under an alias, of course).

Over Jason's shoulder, Tim spotted his own face on a monitor. Jason's computer setup was simple, and Tim could definitely think of some improvements, but it was secure, and it worked. Jason's contact lens must have been transmitting to the monitor in real time. Interesting.

When the roar of Jason's bike faded into the distance, Tim wasted no time going for the monitors. He sat down in the rolly chair, feeling ridiculously small when his feet didn't even reach the ground.

"What are you doing?" Dick appeared behind him, holding a to-go box from Batburger.

"I'm watching Jay." Tim gestured at the shaky view from the contact lens as Jason approached the city. The lights of Gotham began to sharpen, buildings emerging from the shadows. Only now that he was outside of it did Tim realize how grim it looked.

"Um, no you're not." Pulling Tim away from the computers by the back of the chair, Dick spun him around to face him with his hands on his hips. "That's too violent for you."

Unamused, Tim looked him dead in the eyes. "Dick, I shadowed Batman for three years. I've seen all the shit there is to see." Dick frowned at the curse. Tim didn't care. "I'm perfectly capable of seeing whatever happens with Jason."

For some reason, Dick looked stricken by his argument. He was staring at Tim, some weird mix of pity and sadness on his face. It made Tim's skin prickled. Backing away slightly, he fidgeted with his hands, picking at his cuticles.

"Tim, I'm so sorry you had to see all that," Dick finally said, his voice soft as a sunrise.

"It wasn't a big deal," Tim mumbled. He found himself wanting the conversation to be over. "Point is, I can watch what Jason's doing."

"Tim, it *was* a big—" Cutting himself off, Dick took a deep breath. "I don't care what you saw, Tim. You're thirteen. You shouldn't see things like what Jason has to do."

"Jason's only sixteen!"

“Yeah, and I don’t like that he’s out there either!” Dick spun around. Running a hand through his hair, he took Tim’s place in front of the monitor, eyes locked on the screen. “I hate that he’s doing this. But I can’t stop him. He’s been through enough. He’s earned the right to make his own decisions about these things.”

“Why can’t I, then? I already told you, I’ve seen tons of the stuff he has. I watched him kill people, Dick. I’m not saying I’ve been through more—obviously I haven’t, I don’t even come close—but I’ve been through *enough* .”

“It’s not about how much you’ve been through, baby bird,” Dick said. “It’s about the fact that you shouldn’t go through any more.”

Tim scowled. It wasn’t fair. The things he saw out there didn’t even affect him like they should. He’d never felt like the air was knocked out of him at the sight of blood. He’d never had to stifle a scream when a gun went off. He always just watched, passive and uncaring. It was fucked up of him, yeah, but it was also perfect for keeping an eye on Jason.

He could already tell that if he said any of this to Dick, he’d just get concerned. Dick always got concerned when he didn’t need to be.

Watching him, Dick’s expression softened. “Listen, baby bird,” he said. “I’ll watch Jason. If anything bad starts happening to him, I’ll tell you, and you can watch until he’s okay again.”

It still wasn’t fair, but Tim knew when he was out of options. So he nodded. “Fine.”

“Good.” Relief flooded Dick’s expression. “Now go get some dinner, Tim. You haven’t had any.”

Honestly, Tim had completely forgotten he was supposed to eat. On the way back from Batburger, Jason had stopped at a small grocery store near the edge of the city. They’d gone through the aisles, and every time he grabbed an item, Jason would check if Tim liked it. Shockingly, he got it right almost every time. Tim remembered that they’d made sure to accommodate his food preferences at the Manor, but he’d figured that was just something Alfred did so he wouldn’t waste food on something Tim didn’t eat.

Either way, the fridge was now stocked with a healthy supply of food Tim could eat. He grabbed a carton of strawberries(prewashed, uncut), and went to sit cross-legged in the middle of the training mat.

It had become his favorite place in the safe house for some reason.

Maybe it was the bo. When Jason had begun to show him how to use it, Tim had felt his mind latch on the same way it had with photography. He wanted to know how the bo staff worked. More than that, he wanted to know everything about it. Where had it originated from? What was its main use? How common was it in modern society?

His fingers itched for his computer, but that was back at Drake Manor. If he was staying with Dick, he'd have to ask him to get that. And his camera. Fuck; now that he'd remembered his camera, Tim missed the comforting weight of it around his neck. It was nighttime. That was supposed to mean taking pictures. It was supposed to mean being in Gotham.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. Tim knocked sharply on his head to make the thoughts go away. The bo. To distract himself, he took it back off the rack and began practicing his stances. Earlier in the afternoon, Jason had taught him a few basic strikes, and he practiced those too. Over and over, slower then faster. The rhythm helped keep him calm.

"Tim."

Of course. Because things couldn't just go smoothly.

Dropping the staff, Tim was beside Dick in a second, taking on the scene on the monitors. Jason was surrounded by men, all with guns, and all very clearly interested in murdering the Red Hood. A tilt of Jason's head also revealed a gash on his bicep. Add that to the bullet wound he was still recovering from—and hey, why hadn't Dick stopped him from going out because of that?—, and Jason was screwed. Even if they didn't shoot him, those guys would beat him half to death.

"Move." Tim shoved Dick out of the way via the rolly chair before he even had a chance to comply. Bending over the keyboard, he switched to another monitor. From his surroundings, his best guess was that Jason was in some sort of below-ground area, probably a basement judging from the size. That would mean his best way out was up, but none of that would matter if Tim couldn't tell him where to go.

Furiously, Tim dug through Jason's files. He hadn't bothered to close or secure them—sloppy, something Tim would need to talk to him about. It was working for him right now, though. Somewhere in here there had to be details about Jason's location.

There! Arkham Labs, a psychiatric facility dedicated to mental health research and treatment development. Naturally, it was all a front. Arkham was just as corrupt as the rest of the city.

Personally, Tim had considered suggesting they move the patients to an asylum outside the city. Gotham would never be the place those people could actually recover.

The lab was really dedicated to narcotics. Specifically, it was developing new ones. Tim clicked open the file—

Wait, no. Jason. In danger. Focus on the blueprints.

Pulling them up, Tim took three seconds to memorize the layout. Then he was back to the monitor with Jason's view, frantically searching for its controls.

"Can I have the chair back?" he asked without pausing his typing. "It's easier to think when I'm not hunched over."

Wordlessly, Dick slid the chair back over to him. Tim proceeded to sit and hunch over in a slightly more comfortable way. There was facial recognition software in the lens, which meant there had to be an overlay for Jay to see it, which meant—there!

Tim quickly pulled up the settings for the overlay on the second monitor and made a few hasty edits. A speech bubble popped up in Jason's vision.

Hood, take out the guy in the middle and go through the wall - T, he typed. Jason made a surprised noise.

The wall in question separated the room Jason was in and the hallway, which led to the elevators. Tim remembered grenades being put in his utility belt, and he prayed that they hadn't been used. Hopefully, the shock from the explosion would give him a few moments head start. Hopefully, Jason would listen to Tim.

Jason listened to Tim.

Three seconds after he sent the message, Jason threw a grenade with one hand and fired with the other. The grenade stuck to the wall, and the man blocking his path fell with blood blossoming from his knee. Then the wall exploded, and Jason ran.

"What now?" he called, the audio transmitting from a speaker hooked

up to the monitor. It wasn't loud, but luckily, Tim had good ears.

In the elevator, 24th floor , Tim typed in response. The earpiece was only a recorder, not a comms device, so his only option for communicating was the overlay. *Go off the balcony* . There had also been a grappling hook in Jason's belt.

Jason did as he said, speeding into the elevator and spamming the close button for the door. Tim and Dick got a good view of the guns aimed at their brother as the people who'd been surrounding him fired. Jay fired back, holding them off until the doors closed. Then he sagged against the wall.

"Fucking hell, baby bird," he said. "You shouldn't be watching this."

You're welcome , Tim typed.

He was rewarded with a snort of laughter. "Yeah, yeah, thanks for saving my ass. I expect Robin's having a fit right now."

Tim had forgotten Dick was there. Looking over his shoulder, he found him staring open-mouthed at the monitor. *He's definitely freaking out* , he told Jason.

"Oh, wonderful." Jason shoved himself off the wall as the elevator slowed and got ready for the doors to open. "You think they know I'm up here?"

Probably.

"Agreed, baby bird." Jason exchanged the gun in his right hand for his grappling hook. "We're about to have about half a second of fun." The lift stopped. "Ready?"

Yeah .

"Awesome," Jason replied, like he was about to do a trick shot on the basketball court. "Here we go." The doors opened on ten security guards, guns drawn. Jason charged them, ducking low to avoid the spray of bullets and shoved his way past them. The balcony was a few yards away. He careened out the doors, bullets still flying too close for comfort. Adrenaline sanf in Tim's veins, his surroundings falling away as the world became Jason's line of sight. The ground disappeared as he reached the balcony's edge and leapt.

The grappling hook discharged, aiming for the top of a building. For a

few gut twisting moments, Jason was free-falling. Then the hook caught, the line snapped taught, and Jason was swinging, home free as he headed for an alley a few buildings away.

“Baby bird,” he said as he landed. His bike was parked here, behind the dumpster. “I’m coming back now. Get off comms and make sure Dick doesn’t hyperventilate for me, please?”

Not comms, but alright , Tim said. The world melted back into focus, leaving him sitting in the chair with blood still roaring in his ears. He turned to find Dick standing frozen beside him.

His brother was in shock. Dick’s mouth hung slightly open, gaze fixed on the monitor now showing Jason’s ride back to the safehouse.

“Are you alright?” Tim asked. He stood to get Dick some water. That was good for people, right? When they were stressed? He’d never known how to help someone when they were having big emotions.

“I…” Dick blinked rapidly a few times, slowly following Tim to the fridge. “I…Tim, that was incredible.”

Tim shrugged. “I told you I could help.”

“I guess you did.” Dick took the water bottle Tim offered him and drained half of it in one go. “I believed you, you know. I just didn’t want you to see the bad things happening.”

“Dick, there’s no point in trying to stop me from seeing it. We live in *Gotham* . I’m gonna see it anyway, even if it’s not on Jason’s patrol.”

Dick looked at him. “You realize how fu—messed up that is.”

“Yeah.” Tim gestured back at the monitor. “Which is why you should let me *help* . Jason’s actually doing something! He can do even more if I help him behind the scenes. I’m not even going out to do the fighting, Dick. It’s totally safe.”

Before Dick could respond, they heard Jason pulling up outside. He came in a few moments later, helmet tucked under his arm.

“Timmy, that was fucking incredible,” he said, golding up a hand for a high five. Tim ran over and gave it to him, never mind the fact that he had to jump for it. “You totally saved my ass out there.”

“It wasn’t hard,” Tim told him. “I mean, you should really be more

careful with leaving all your files open, but it worked out this time. Still. Fix that. Or I can fix it for you."

"I just might take you up on that." Slinging an arm around Tim's shoulders, Jason walked them back over to Dick. He was sweaty, but Tim didn't really mind. Having someone's arm around him felt nice. "How're you feeling, Dickiebird?"

"Fine." Dick had drunk the rest of the water. "But you need to eat dinner."

Jason hadn't had dinner before patrol, saying it would make him slow. Upon receiving a glare from Dick, he'd hastily clarified that he would be eating after.

"I will as soon as I shower." Jason really was very sweaty. "But what about you? What'd you think of Tim?"

"He was amazing."

"Dick wouldn't let me watch until something went wrong," Tim told Jason.

Jason raised his eyebrows. "Well, that's understandable. There's some fucked up shit out there. Maybe we could get a compromise, though. You've got some serious talent, baby bird. I could use your help out there. From *behind* the computer, though." He gave him a pointed look. "No fighting, and no field work."

"Deal," Tim said immediately. Helping Jason had made him feel alive, even if it was only brief. It had felt like something in him was waking up, something that had been shut down for a long time.

"We're gonna discuss this more before it's an official deal, baby bird." Removing his arm from around Tim's shoulders, Jason stepped towards the bathroom. "I'm showering first, though. While I'm in there—" he grinned "—you should think about a code name."

A grin of his own broke onto Tim's face, surprising even him. It was like feeling sunlight on his face for the first time in years. "I'll do that," he said.

Jason gave him a mock salute and disappeared into the bathroom. Tim held onto this emotion with both hands, even as it faded. He wanted to memorize the way it felt, the warmth it left in his chest.

This was a feeling. This was living. *Tim* was living, and he suddenly realized he wanted to continue.

Chapter End Notes

> VIGILANTE TIME BABY!!!! I'm gonna give Tim a new name for Reasons, and I'm still figuring it out. If you've got any ideas feel free to put them in the comments(If I use it I'll credit you in the notes)!

Chapter 13: Lonely Bird, Protecting his Family

Chapter Notes

> We return with more vigilante times! I am very excited for this, because it means that the plot is picking up and things are moving. Song rec for this chapter is Heroes of Today, by Once Monsters. That's not all, though. I made a playlist! I'll put it at the bottom of this section. Enjoy!
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: non-graphic torture
>
> Playlist: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/1XzLTU2ur8p5RAu3vMW8N0?si=38929957689d4da8

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was Thursday, which meant Dick had the closing shift at Batburger. Technically, he didn't have to go. Jason had offered to pay Dick's expenses, seeing as he was a notorious crime lord and all that. When he heard the offer, Dick's pride had smarted, but he remembered: Batburger barely paid him enough to get by. If Jason helped him, he could take some time to find a better paying job, and then he could pull his weight. The three of them were basically living together now, anyway.

Most nights they stayed at Jason's safehouse. It was easier when he got back from patrols than going back to Dick's, especially when he got home injured. Jason had bought the two of them beds, and the warehouse had slowly been transforming into a more… *homely* type of place.

For the past two weeks, Tim had been running comms for Jason under the alias Specter. In Dick's opinion, the name fit just a little too well next to Tim's dull eyes and quiet footsteps, but he kept his mouth shut. It wasn't his place to say anything.

Dick gazed out the window at the dark sky. In Gotham, light pollution had blotted out the stars, turning the sky into a shadowy blanket over the city. Jason would have started patrol by now, which meant Tim was on comms, seeing all the shit Gotham had to offer. Dick hated it.

He knew Tim had seen bad things. All of them had seen bad things. But it didn't stop Dick from wanting to protect him. Every time he saw Tim's tiny form sitting cross-legged in the chair, watching the footage

from Jason's contact lens, he wanted to scoop him up and hug him close to his chest; he wanted to shield Tim from all the pain Jason saw.

If he did do that, Tim would be furious. And he was right. Tim had seen enough, and there was no point in protecting innocence that wasn't there.

Still, when Dick looked at his baby brother, he couldn't stop himself from wanting to.

That didn't even begin to cover how he felt about *Jason* . Jason, who had been murdered and dragged back to life. Jason, who came back to Gotham and immediately threw himself into the darkest shadows their city had. He was sixteen fucking years old, and he was fighting alone against Gotham's filth.

Well , Dick thought, thinking about Tim in front of the computers, *he's not alone now.*

But that wasn't what Dick was mad about. He was mad that even though Jason was only sixteen, he was the only person Dick had ever met that actually seemed capable of doing something. As the Red Hood, he made real progress against crime and corruption. He was successful. As much as he hated to admit it, Gotham needed Jason. It was difficult, but Dick could live with that.

Until something bad happens, and it'll be all your fault .

Dick was pulled out of his thoughts by his phone ringing. No one was in line, so he got it from his pocket and checked the caller ID.

Tim.

Shit . Dick's heart picked up as he answered the call. "Baby bird? What's going on?"

"Jason's hurt," Tim said in a voice too calm for the situation. It was matter of fact and emotionless, like a computer stating facts. Dick wanted to throw up.

"Where? Home?" he asked, already yanking his apron off. Tori, the girl working with him tonight, called out a question, but he ignored her.

"No, he's still out there. He was going after a few dealers, ones who've

bothered him before. They surprised him and tied him up. I think…" Here, finally, a little fear entered Tim's voice. "I think they're gonna torture him."

Oh, hell no. That was not happening. Not to Jason. Not on Dick's watch.

"Where?" he asked, grabbing his bag from the back room. The doors swung behind him as he left, striding for the door.

"Dick, you can't just leave," Tori called.

"I quit!" Dick responded.

His motorcycle was parked outside(yes, Dick had kept the one he stole and begun to use it as his own. Could you blame him? It was fun.). Stopping only long enough to dig his hoodie out of his bag, Dick climbed on and sped off, phone uncomfortably squeezed between his ear and his shoulder.

It was nearly impossible to hear Tim over the motorcycle's engine, but Dick didn't have time to go back to the warehouse. Tim yelled directions to him, leading Dick towards the docks.

The warehouse he found was just like all the others. Sketchy, dark, big. Why was there so much criminal activity in warehouses? It was starting to get a bit cliché, in Dick's opinion.

Before he went in, Dick got the rest of the information from Tim.

"There's five people in there with him. All masked. They should be in the back corner, so get in as close as you can to there. From what I can see, only two of them have guns."

"Great. Only two deadly weapons."

"I mean, once you're in there you could find Hood's. He probably wouldn't mind you borrowing them."

"No, it's fine. Guns aren't my thing, anyway." While they'd been staying at the safehouse, Jason had managed to get Dick to let him teach him to use escrima sticks. Dick had to admit, he enjoyed using them. They worked like extensions of his arms, and Dick had always preferred fistfights to weapons. "I've gotta hang up, T—Specter. Watch through the lens. I'll call you when I get him."

“Okay. Good luck.” Tim hung up before Dick had the chance to. Sighing, he put his phone in his backpack and began to creep around the side of the warehouse.

Tim had never specified the corner in a way Dick could orient himself with, so he listened for any sounds through the wall. The people ended up being on the same side of the building as Dick had parked. Through the thin wall, he could hear loud voices asking muffled questions. He could also hear the impact of something hard hitting flesh.

Anger flooded him, and Dick saw red. Those people were hurting Jason. They were hurting his little brother.

A savage smile twisted his lips. Well. These fuckers were about to find out just how bad of an idea that was.

There was a door a few feet away. Not bothering with stealth, Dick pulled up his hood and yanked it open. Rusty hinges screamed in protest, and six surprised faces greeted Dick inside.

The five people Tim had told him about were surrounding Jason, who was tied to a chair. Thankfully, his helmet was still on. He’d started wearing a domino beneath it, but having it removed felt a little too dangerous.

Jason’s head tilted towards him. “Huh,” he said. “Wasn’t expecting that.”

“Shut up!” One of the guys, a short man who looked like he got off on hurting people who couldn’t fight back, hit Jason in the gut with a baseball bat.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Dick said. His voice rang out through the warehouse, calm and clear and dangerous.

His words had the effect of someone questioning a football team’s masculinity. The dealers tensed, hands going to their weapons. Right now, the guns weren’t drawn. Good. Their attention shifted off of Jason, focusing completely on Dick.

“And why’s that?” another one asked. This person was short as well, but her voice was feminine.

“That’s my friend,” Dick said. He took a few steps forward while they were all still wary. It was easy enough to guess their thoughts. Some

guy in a hoodie, walking straight into their interrogation? Amateur. That gave him an advantage, and he was proven right when they didn't immediately draw their guns.

"Well, your *friend* here was just about to tell us a few things," the guy with the bat said.

"He was? Were you gonna tell these guys something, Hood?" Dick turned his voice playful, like he and Jay were in on a joke.

Jason shook his head. "Nah, they wish." He grunted when the Bat-man(ha. Bat-man. See what Dick did there?) hit him again. The anger turned to a haze of red in Dick's mind.

"I told you not to do that." His voice had turned quiet, and hard as diamond.

"Oh yeah?" Bat-man leered at him. "Who's gonna stop me?"

Instead of answering, Dick charged him.

The guns were out in an instant, bullets pinging off every surface as they tried to shoot Dick. Dodged between support pillars, Dick ran towards the gunmen. Though he wanted to go for the man who'd hit Jason first, he knew he had to take the guns out of commission. As he got closer, Dick leapt into a handspring, landing to the side of the first gunman. He knocked him out with a blow to the head and took his weapon. Using its handle, he hit the other gunman across the face. The man crumpled, leaving Dick with three opponents and one bat.

The person closest to him took a swing. Dick ducked and danced around to be behind him. "Too slow," he sing-songed, landing a kick to the small of the man's back. He fell over, and Dick again used the gun handle to knock him out.

The other guy landed a few hits, but Dick knew how to recover fast. Dropping to a crouch, he swung his leg out and knocked the guy's legs out from under him. He hit the ground with an audible thud, and Dick kicked him in the face.

That left him with the Bat-man. He stood on the other side of Jason, clutching the bat with both hands.

"Feeling like apologizing yet?" Dick asked him, grinning. He wasn't even sweating.

“No,” the man spat. Oh, so now he was just being difficult.

Dick pouted. “That’s rude.”

The man yelled as he swung the bat at him. Ducking, Dick grabbed his wrist and twisted. He didn’t stop until he heard a crack. The bat fell to the ground as the man shrieked. Releasing him, Dick punched him in the gut. The man stumbled back a few steps before falling on his ass.

“This could have gone so much nicer,” Dick said. “All you had to do was stop.”

“Fuck you!”

“Ooh, potty mouth.” Stepping closer, Dick crouched so he could look the man in the eyes. “Now. I hope you know you’re getting off easy. My friend over there can kill people. But me?” He leaned a little closer. “I’ll make you wish you were dead.”

Genuine fear flickered through the man’s eyes before Dick slammed the gun into his temple, and he passed out.

“That was edgy,” Jason commented as Dick walked over to untie him. “Did you plan that ahead of time?”

“Nah.” Dick fiddled with the knots holding Jason’s wrists together. “Just felt like a good line. Maybe word will get around that you’ve got someone looking out for you.”

“Yeah.” Jason went to stand up and fell back, wheezing. “Fuck, I think they broke a rib.”

Dick’s calm instantly shattered. He crouched down beside Jason, looking for any visible injuries he could see. The faint glimmer of the contact lens’ tech reminded him of Tim. “Is your earpiece still in?”

“No, they broke it.”

“Okay. I gotta call Tim, then. But we’ve got to get you home, and you can’t drive like this.”

“No shit.” Jason gasped as Dick pulled his arm over his shoulder and hoisted him to his feet. “Yep, they definitely broke a rib.”

“We’ll get you patched up at home, don’t worry.” Dick was saying that to himself almost as much as he was to Jason. All the way through getting him on the bike, calling Tim, and starting the drive back to the

safehouse, he worried.

What if Tim hadn't called him? What if he hadn't answered? Jason could still be in that warehouse getting the shit beaten out of him, and Dick would never know.

And Tim would be watching. Horror froze Dick's blood. He imagined Tim sitting, eyes locked on the screen as his brother got hurt again and again, powerless to do anything to help. That would fuck anyone up, and Tim was already in a concerning mental state as it was.

It had been just a few hours ago that Dick had been contemplating his acceptance of Jason's crusade. None of that had changed. Gotham *needed* the Red Hood. But Dick and Tim needed their brother alive.

When they got back to the warehouse, Jason sat on the workbench and held ice to his ribs. Purple and red bruises were blooming across his skin. Dick paced, arms crossed, while Tim sat quietly researching how to care for broken ribs.

"Robin, you're gonna make a hole in the floor," Jason told him. "And that's saying something, since the floor is concrete."

"Really? You're joking?" Dick stopped, staring aghast at Jason.

His brother's expression turned annoyed. "Yeah. Dick, you knew this was going to happen. I'm not magical. When I go out there, I'm gonna get hurt sometimes. It's inevitable. I know how to take care of myself."

"I know," Dick growled. He glared at the floor, then looked over at Tim. "But knowing it and seeing it are two different things."

"I'm not stopping, Dick."

"I know. And I'm not asking you to." Dick took a deep breath. He'd been thinking about this the whole way home. "But you're not going out there alone anymore."

Tim made an offended noise. "He's not alone!"

"No, he's not," Dick corrected himself. "Sorry, baby bird. What I meant to say is that you're not going out there alone, *physically* . I'm coming with you."

Someone had to watch Jason's back. Tim couldn't do anything that

wasn't doable over the computer, and there was no way Dick was letting his baby brother go out into the field. Jason needed someone as backup, someone capable of taking care of themself.

Judging by the humorous expression on his face, Jason had already known what Dick was going to say. "So, what I'm hearing is that we're a crime fighting trio."

Dick couldn't stop himself from laughing as he grinned. "Yes. We are absolutely a crime fighting trio."

"Epic." Jason moved to stand, but sat back with a yelp. "Come over here and give me high fives, motherfuckers."

Dick and Tim joined Jason in a three way high five, all of them smiling. Dick knew this was stupid. He was out of his mind; letting his little brothers be vigilantes and then becoming one himself? This was probably the easiest way to get all of them killed.

But this was the path they found themselves on. Maybe this was the path they'd been on since that night at the Manor, but Dick knew it didn't really matter. What mattered was that they were here now, and Dick was going to keep his brothers safe, no matter what.

Chapter End Notes

> MMMMMMMMMM Nightwingnightwingnightwing!!! Except I'm not sure I want to keep that name because it had some specific symbolism with Dick leaving the Robin mantle and striking out on his own, and I kind of want Dick's alias here to be something symbolic for him in this story. Feel free to suggest things if you've got ideas!
>
> Also, Tim's name. I chose Specter because of the three(3) times I used ghostly things to describe him. In this story, Tim doesn't really see himself as being fully alive, so he naturally gravitated to names suggesting impermanence and intangibility. The fact that no one sees him helping Hood adds to that effect. I hope y'all like it, because I do.
>
> Thanks for the comments and kudos everyone's been leaving! They're all awesome and I love seeing them. I'll be back tomorrow with the next chapter!

Chapter 14: Lost Bird, Falling

Chapter Notes

> I'm laughing and y'all won't know why until you read it. ANYWAY this was a super fun chapter to write and I hope you all enjoy. Thank you as always for the comments and kudos, all you people are legends and I'm so grateful that you enjoy my writing! Enjoy!
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: graphic descriptions of violence, death, human trafficking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Now, if you watch carefully, Aegis, you’ll see that I’m moving very *carefully* and *quietly* , so they don’t know I’m coming.” Jason barely breathed the words, but they held as much sarcasm as if he’d yelled.

“Hey, I *was* careful,” Dick snarked. Though Jason couldn’t see him through the comms, he could picture his brother, leaning back in his chair with popcorn or some other snack, watching the feed from Jason’s lens like a movie. Tim would be next to him, focused more intently than either of them could replicate, taking in a million things in Jason’s sight that he would never think to pay attention to. “Excuse me for not having time to make a plan before they started beating the shit out of you.”

You say that like I haven’t had the shit out of me before , Jason almost responded, but he bit it back just in time. Whenever he brought up his experiences with violence, Dick got quiet. He would never say it, but it bothered him. After so many years with pain as a second language, it was hard to phase out casual remarks about suffering, but Jason was getting better at it. Anything to keep the sadness out of Dick’s eyes.

“I know,” he said instead, “but ninety nine percent of the time, that would’ve gotten you killed. You’ve gotta be stealthy.”

“Yeah, got it. Stealthy. I can be stealthy.” Considering the number of times Dick had climbed the chandelier in Wayne Manor without Bruce noticing, Jason was sure that he could. The memory made him smile as he crept through the warehouse.

For the past few weeks, Dick and Tim had both been training in combat. Tim was training because he’d apparently become hyperfixated on the bo staff, and Jason was down for him to learn

anything that would let him get better at defending himself. Dick was training to go out in the field as Aegis, Red Hood's new partner. He'd decided on the name after Jason teased him about his Percy Jackson phase, of all things.

Not that Jason was complaining. Aegis was a powerful weapon, a shield used by Zeus. A protector. If that didn't fit Dick, Jason didn't know what did.

Jason had been teaching him to fight with escrima sticks, as well as helping him refine his hand to hand combat abilities. Dick could throw a punch, no problem—the guy was big, he had strength on his side—, but his footwork was sloppy, and he could absolutely put his acrobatic abilities to use. Because of that, Dick wasn't going out in the field until Jason deemed him ready. For now, he stayed on comms with Tim as last ditch backup just in case.

At this current moment, Jason was sneaking up on some kind of deal. They didn't know what was being sold, but seeing as Jason had gotten the tip from a junkie he knew by acquaintance, he was assuming there were drugs involved.

The deal was, of course, in a warehouse by the docks. Pretty much any kind of illegal business transaction happened near the docks where most illegal merchandise was brought in, so the suppliers could get it off their hands quickly. The concentration helped Jason out a lot, since he could pay special attention to anything happening near Gotham's coast.

Jason was on a catwalk above the deal. Right now, it seemed that only the buyers had arrived. No containers of any kind were around inside the warehouse. Finding a good spot out of sight. Jason crouched down to wait for the suppliers to appear.

About ten minutes later, the sound of a truck approaching made Jason tense. He pointed his gun down, towards the people below them. Aiming for their shoulders, not their heads. When Tim started running comms as Specter, Jason had decided that he wouldn't kill unless absolutely necessary. Dick was right. Just because Tim had seen bad things didn't mean he had to see more.

The truck pulled in through the big doors and parked in the middle of the floor. Vaguely, Jason wondered why it was so big. People didn't usually buy this many drugs at once.

The suppliers got out from the front of the truck and walked around to

meet their clients. One guy in a suit with three bodyguards. Why were they always so cliché?

Well, to be fair, Gotham's more unique villains were *deeply* fucked up. Maybe cliché was better.

Jason watched as the people below him negotiated, recording everything they said as evidence for after they got arrested. He'd send it to the police, who had been getting considerably more help from him after the whole 'no killing' decision. For nearly thirty minutes, the people debated, throwing price after price at one another, the supplier going high while the buyer went low.

Finally, they agreed on an amount suspiciously high for a shipment of drugs. Was this a new type, something just hitting the streets? Jason tried to think back through the conversation for anything out of the ordinary. All the terminology they'd used had been vague. It could easily be something new. That was the theory Jason was just about to accept as fact when the supplier nodded to one of his bodyguards. They stepped over and opened the back of the truck.

People, but not just people. Kids. Some looked as young as six years old, and the oldest couldn't have been over thirteen.

An image of Tim flashed through Jason's mind as he heard the smallest intake of breath through his earpiece. For just a moment he saw his baby brother down in that truck, bound and gagged and scared.

The Pit hadn't bothered Jason since he'd saved Dick from Scarecrow. He'd already been getting a handle on it, and the euphoria of seeing his brothers again had made his control even tighter.

Now, green filled his vision. Acidic anger began pumping through his veins. Logically, Jason knew his mind was clouded by the Pit's influence, but to him it felt like everything was clear as day.

"Hood? Should I come meet you?" Dick asked. His voice was steel. He was just as angry as Jason, but their anger wasn't the same. He wanted to save those kids. So did Jason, but it was more than that. These people—they were evil. Evil people didn't survive meeting the Red Hood.

"No, stay home. I've got this covered." Jason barely registered his own voice, light and unconcerned. There was only one goal in his mind, one prophecy he had to fulfill:

None of these people would leave the warehouse alive.

Jason jumped down from the catwalk. His boots and the Pit's power kept his legs from breaking as he landed a few yards away from the truck. The criminals' heads snapped around to him, the bodyguards lifting their guns. They were idiots. Jason had been trained by the League of Assassins, the student of Talia al Ghul. He was an instrument of death who had returned from its darkness to exact revenge on those who hurt the innocent.

Six shots from Jason's guns. Six holes opened in the bodyguards' heads, blood and brain matter spurting as they crumpled. The leaders' expressions turned from surprise to fear. They tried to run for the truck, likely hoping to use it as their getaway vehicle. Jason stopped them with two bullets to their legs. The two of them fell with twin shrieks of pain.

The sound pleased the Pit. It had been so long since Jason fed it. He could hear it whispering in his head: *more, more, more, they deserve it* . It was right.

He took his time as he walked over to where the two criminals were, making a pathetic effort to crawl away from him. A laugh tumbled from his lips as the Pit sang to him, seeking blood. The voice modulator distorted it into a metallic, inhuman sound. Seeing the panic in his prey's faces only made the Pit louder.

Who said Batman was the master of fear? Jason was wielding it pretty damn well himself.

"A lot of people tell me I can't be an executioner," Jason said in a mockery of contemplation. "So I guess I can be judge and jury too.

"The charges against the accused—" he removed the empty magazine from his gun, letting it fall to the floor with a clatter "—kidnapping children, taking them from their homes, causing them fear, and dehumanizing them to the point of being merchandise in whatever deal you were making."

"We were just—"

"Shut up, or I'll shoot you in the mouth," Jason said. The supplier's jaw snapped shut, his eyes widening to the size of golf balls. Jason loaded a new magazine, preloaded with bullets, from his belt into his gun. "The proposed *discipline* for these crimes is death. Please allow a few moments for the jury to make its decision."

He paused theatrically, tapping his chin with his free hand, while he trained his gun on his prey. *Make them pay* , the Pit whispered. *Blood for the blood they would have spilled* .

“The jury has made its decision, and the judge will read it now.” They couldn’t see it, but beneath his hood, a wolfish smile curled Jason’s lips. “The jury has decreed the accused to be…”

The faintest flicker of hope passed over the two faces below him. Jason could almost hear their thoughts. *Maybe he’s crazy like Two-Face. Maybe we can survive this.*

“Guilty.”

Hope died, replaced by terror.

“The executioner will now do his duty.”

Two more shots, and the bodies went limp. Jason’s chest swelled with pride, his entire body light with the high from the Pit. God, why did he ever stop?

“Hood! Jason!” Dick’s voice, finally registering as the green fog receded from Jason’s mind. “Hood, you’ve gotta get the kids.”

And *oh* . That was why he’d stopped. Because Tim and Dick had just watched him murder eight people, and knowing your brother was a killer was one thing but to see it happen was another entirely.

Not only that. To see him killing, high on the Pit’s bloodlust and *enjoying* the bloodshed? In everyone’s eyes but the League’s, that made Jason a monster.

And Tim. Tim was only thirteen. He was no older than those kids in the truck. Jason had never opposed him helping on comms because he knew Tim would find a way to help anyway, and at least on comms as Specter Jason could keep him out of the field. But Tim had just been treated to a first person view of Pit rage, all because Jason couldn’t keep it under control. He’d sworn to himself that he would never hurt either of his brothers, but he’d just made them watch as he executed all those people.

They’d never trust him again. Jason imagined coming home to an empty warehouse, Tim and Dick disappeared, fleeing from their psychopath zombie brother who’d come back from the dead without his humanity. They would look at him and see a creature, a thing of

wrath and blood that took the place of thirteen year old Jason Todd.

But I'm still me , he thought desperately. *I'm still Jason. I'm just not the same* .

It didn't matter. Murder would make him a monster in their eyes. Jason pictured Dick, face twisted in hatred as he snarled at him to stay back. He pictured Tim, face expressionless as he gazed at Jason with no trace of the warmth he'd seen tingeing his baby brother's features.

He couldn't bear to see that. He couldn't bear to see them stop loving him.

Jason turned off his comms and ran.

Chapter End Notes

> Me, writing this: I could make this a super long chapter and end it happily
> Also me: nah
>
> As an extra little bonus thing: When Dick saw Jason fire the first shot, he pulled Tim away from the computer and covered his eyes. :)
>
> Let me know what you think in the comments!(sorry for the pain)

Chapter 15: Little Bird, Holding On

Chapter Notes

> ahahahahahaha, hey guys, did you like last chapter? I forgot to recommend a song for it, which makes me sad, but the song for this one is Brother by Kodaline. I'm half asleep right now, but thank y'all as always for the comments and kudos! They're all awesome and I love seeing them.
>
> No CW's for this chapter :)
>
> Enjoy!

If Dick didn't calm down soon, he was going to have a panic attack, and Tim was almost positive that he was not the person to help his brother through extreme emotional distress. That was what Jason was for, with his inspirational words and shit-talking charisma. Tim was just the kid who sat in the background behind his glass wall.

That being said, he was the only one there.

Dick was pacing frantically, holding fistfuls of his hair as he tried to think of a plan. Unfortunately for him, the panic was getting in the way.

For his part, Tim was, as usual, numb. He could see why Jason had run. That was an easy line to follow: murder, guilt, shame. He could see why he'd run, and he wanted him to come back. He wanted Jason to know that they weren't mad, that they didn't hate him for what he'd done.

But there was no urgency, no loss of control like Dick was experiencing. Tim sat in his chair and watched his brother break down with no clue how to help.

Get Jason back , his mind told him. That made sense. Jason being gone was what was hurting Dick, so if Tim got him back, Dick would stop hurting. But Dick was right in front of him, and Tim *knew* there was some way he could make him feel better with just words, if only he knew which ones.

No matter how hard he searched his mind for the right thing to say, he came up empty.

But…maybe he didn't need words. When they were younger, Dick was always a tactile kid. Any time he was in distress, he reached out for contact, whether he was aware of it or not. It was like a second language to him. Ever since they'd reunited, though, Tim had noticed Dick drawing back. When something was happening he would shrink into himself like he had to remember not to reach out.

When you don't speak a language for a long time, you forget how to use it. Maybe Dick had just forgotten.

Without saying anything, Tim got up and went over to Dick. Silently, he wrapped his arms around his big brother and held on tightly, burying his face into Dick's chest. *Please be right, please don't mess up, please…*

Dick hugged him back almost instantly, his chin resting on Tim's head. Tim could feel his brother's hummingbird heartbeat.

"Okay," Dick said after a few minutes, once his breathing had slowed to a normal rate. "Okay. We have to find him."

"He's still got his contact in," Tim said. "We can see where he's going."

"Good." Dick threw himself back into his chair, letting the momentum carry him to the computer setup. Tim followed more slowly. The image from Jason's contact showed him on the road, heading for Gotham. "Where's he going?"

"Probably one of his other safehouses."

Dick stared at Tim. " *Other* safehouses?"

"Yeah?" Tim shrugged. "He's got one, of course he's got others. Did you never ask him about them?"

" *No* ." Dick's voice had gone up an octave. "I just assumed he'd tell us if he had other places of residence."

"It doesn't really come up in conversation as a topic," Tim pointed out. Switching off of Jason's video, he pulled up a list of twelve addresses. "These should be all of them."

"Shit," Dick muttered, "I mean—crap, why does he have so many?"

"I guess it makes it harder for people to find him?" Tim printed out

the addresses. “It doesn’t really matter right now, though, does it?”

“No, I guess it doesn’t.”

“Then I think we should split up.” Tim ripped the address sheet in half and gave one to Dick, then went to get his shoes. On his way past the training area, he grabbed a small knife to slip in his pocket. If it wasn’t so noticeable, he’d bring the bo—over the past few weeks, he’d gotten significantly better at it. He and Jason had begun training with padded ones so they could spar. “We ride into the city together and each check half of the houses.”

As expected, Dick immediately protested. “Tim, you’re thirteen, you cannot be out on the streets of *Gotham* alone—”

“Dick, we’ve established that I can take care of myself.” Tim cut him off sharply. Spinning around, he fixed his brother with a determined stare. As much as he secretly appreciated it, right now, he didn’t have time for Dick’s brotherly concern. He had to help his brothers. “I’ve been out there alone for years. Just because you actually care about how messed up that is doesn’t mean I’m any less capable. Now, what’s more important tonight: keeping an eye on me, or finding Jason before he does something stupid?”

Tim knew the answer, and so did Dick. The fight seeped out of him as he dropped his head, shoulders sagging. He didn’t have to say anything.

“We need to go,” Tim said, the sharp edge in his voice disappearing. “He’s out there, and he needs us.”

“Yeah.” Dick bowed his head with his eyes squeezed shut as he drew in a deep breath. “Okay. Okay. Let’s go,” he said, more to himself than Tim.

They rode into Gotham twenty miles too fast, Tim’s arms locked around Dick’s waist and his face pressed into his jacket. Neither of them had bothered with helmets. When they looked back on it later, Dick would probably be mad at himself for not at least making Tim wear one, but that wasn’t important right now.

Parking by Dick’s apartment, they split up. Instead of phones, Tim had connected their comms so they were on a separate channel from Jason’s. Even though he’d turned his off, Tim didn’t know if he would

run if he realized they were looking for him.

“You’ve got a flashlight, right?” Dick asked.

“Yeah, Dick.”

“And your emergency signal?”

“Yeah, Dick.”

“And your phone?”

“ *Yeah* , Dick. Can we just go now? Jason’s out there.” Skin prickling, Tim shifted from foot to foot. In one hand he clutched his address sheet so hard the paper had creased. In the other, he was spinning a fidget ring, around and around and around, listening to the soft metallic *shhh* ’s it made to ground himself.

Dick took a deep breath. “Yeah. Okay.” He looked at Tim for a long time, like maybe this was the last time they’d see each other and he had to memorize every detail. Tim couldn’t see why. Given the choice between remembering how he was at nine years old and how he was now, Tim would have picked nine-year-old him in a heartbeat. At least that kid could smile and mean it.

“We’re connected by comms, remember?” Tim tapped his ear. “It’ll all be fine.”

Because it would be. Even though, as he and Dick walked off in seperate directions, Tim felt a bolt of anxiety in his gut. But Dick was not getting into a police car. They were not wrapped in shock blankets. They were connected. They were not leaving each other again.

For two hours, Dick and Tim walked through Gotham in near silence. The only time they talked was to note which safehouse they were trying next, followed by a quiet, “not here” that brought their spirits sinking even lower. Tim searched three apartments near the top of their buildings, a basement that was little more than a dusty storage room, and one penthouse that looked way too pretty to be simply a safehouse.

(In that one, he found the rocks he’d left at Jason’s grave arranged on a shelf. Near them were a variety of other trinkets, little things Tim

had found and left for his brother. An old gold coin from a pawn shop. A poster for the Flying Graysons. A second hand copy of *Pride and Prejudice.* He'd always assumed the caretaker took them, but here they were. Treasured. Important. *Kept* .)

But that safehouse was still empty of the one person Tim truly needed to find. He moved on.

The last address on his list turned out to be the entire bottom level of an apartment building. Tim descended the stairs to the door, a plain wood one with no window. If this safehouse was empty, they had no leads. Jason would have remembered to remove his contact by now, and by the time they got back to the warehouse, he would be gone.

The door was unlocked. It opened soundlessly, and Tim stepped inside.

This safehouse was filled in a way that would have looked good if the space wasn't so big. Supplies filled one corner and a kitchenette took up half the back wall. In the corner opposite the door, there was a bed and three bookshelves, all full. Jason had always loved the classics.

Tim crept through the space, as silent as a ghost. He strained his ears, searching for any sign of Jason. *Please. Please be here* .

Someone behind the bed let out a shaky breath.

In seconds, Tim was there, darting to the space between the bed and the wall. Jason was tucked in the corner, hugging his knees to his chest. Even though his breaths were ragged, his eyes were completely dry as he stared unseeingly at his feet.

"Found him," Tim murmured.

Jason's head snapped up at the sound. He leapt to his feet, pressing back against the wall. He wasn't afraid. The look in his eyes was resigned, expectant, and deeply, deeply sad.

"You guys can have the warehouse," he said, and Tim blinked. Jason's voice was always full, overflowing with emotion and sarcasm that colored every conversation he had. The words that just came out of his mouth were as empty as the dust Tim felt on his tongue when he tried to speak. "I won't come back."

"We don't hate you," Tim replied. His mind whispered rebukes, things like *blunt* and *tactless* , but Jason wasn't running yet. As the sound of

Dick's footsteps echoed through his comms, Tim looked Jason directly in the eyes. "You told us everything already, Jaybird. You told us you'd killed people, and we stayed. We know what you've done, and we already told you: we don't care."

"Hearing about it and seeing it are two very different things," Jason rasped.

That…Tim didn't get that. When Jason had told them those stories, the things he had done, Tim had pictured each moment in his mind. Whether it was through his own imagination or intrusive thoughts forcing him to visualize it, Tim had pictured the blood, the blades, the look on his brother's face when bodies fell before him. He had seen it all, and when the story ended, the kid in front of him was still Jason. Still his brother.

"Well, we've seen it now, and we still care." The motorcycle started in Tim's ear; Dick was approaching, fast, and listening to this entire conversation while he did. Hopefully he'd get here soon. Jason needed someone who could actually use emotions. "Besides, those people deserved it."

"Jesus. Little harsh, Timmy, don't you think?" Jason's attempt at humor was hollow.

"You wouldn't have pulled the trigger if you didn't agree."

For a moment, Jason was silent. His mouth twisted into a bitter smile. "I guess you're right then, baby bird. They did deserve it."

The motorcycle's engine cut out, and Dick's footsteps soon became audible on the stairs, culminating in the door slamming open to reveal their older brother, face pale with worry. He strode across the room and came to a stop beside Tim.

"Tim's right, Jaybird. We knew the deal when we found you again. We accepted it then, and we accept it now. You're our brother, and you're trying to do good in this city. As long as that's true, we'll be beside you. Always."

"But…" Jason floundered, searching for a reason to justify whatever hurt he was feeling. Tim knew how he felt. It was a game he played with himself every night.

"Jay, come back with us." Taking a step forward, Tim held out his hand. "I promise. You're still our brother. We still love you." When

Jason didn't move, Tim decided to let him see a little of Tim's own pain. "Please. I don't want to lose you again."

No matter how miserable it was to be empty all the time, it was a million times worse to be empty alone. Until he found his brothers, Tim hadn't even realized the weight on his shoulders. With it lifted, he found himself feeling different. Not fixed, not by a long shot, but… lighter, somehow. Almost like he *hoped* his feelings would come back.

His family returning had been a saving grace for Tim. If he lost them again, he didn't know what he'd do. Somehow, he knew Jason felt the same.

Jason's eyes softened. Slowly, like a frightened animal, he stepped away from the wall and reached back, taking Tim's hand. The moment they touched, Tim closed the distance and threw himself into Jason's arms, clinging tight to his leather jacket. Jason returned the favor with a crushing one-armed hug, the other reaching out for Dick. Their oldest brother appeared, chin resting on Jason's shoulder, arms around them both. The anxiety in Tim's stomach loosened its grip. They were okay. Or, that wasn't quite right. They *would* be okay.

Chapter 16: Lonely Bird, Watched

Chapter Notes

> This one's short because I'm super tired, but I hope y'all like it. Thank you for the comments and kudos, they mean a ton!
>
> No CW's for this chapter

The night after Jason ran, Dick found himself back on the rooftops.

Despite being so big their voices echoed, the warehouse felt suffocatingly small. Dick needed to feel open air on his face, freezing his lungs, to remind him that he was free. He could run as far as he wanted, and no one could stop him.

Of course, he wasn't going to run. He had his brothers, and he was never leaving him again. The point, the thing that made all the difference, was that he *could*.

Flipping onto a rooftop, Dick added a few of the combat moves he'd been practicing. Integrating his acrobatics into sparring had become an experimental thing between him and Jason. He could flip into kicks, add more force to his punches with momentum only he could get. It was incredible.

Dick leapt a gap between roofs. Last night should never have happened. Jason shouldn't have been afraid that Dick and Tim would hate him. Launching into a backflip and spinning to kick. He shouldn't have had to doubt that they cared about him. He should have felt *safe* . Two punched to thin air, and he was spinning as he jumped the next gap. Dick was the older brother. He was supposed to make sure Jason knew that he was loved. How had he managed to fuck that up?

Pushing himself harder, Dick entered a series of movements, flips and dodges and handsprings, forcing every thought out of his mind so he could just move *faster* —

"Dick."

Dick froze in the middle of a spin, arm still outstretched in a jab. That voice was familiar. He'd heard the gravelly cadence before, on the news and in real life. A pit of dread formed in his stomach as he slowly turned around.

Batman stood behind him on the roof, cape billowing out behind him in the wind. His eyes were hidden behind the white lenses in his cowl. Standing so close to him, Dick realized how indifferent they made him look.

Why was *Batman* , of all people, here? Sure, Dick was Red Hood's brother and in training to become his partner, but no one knew that was *Dick* . Dick Grayson was a delinquent foster kid who could barely make ends meet. He certainly wasn't someone *Batman* would be interested in.

"What do you want." Dick made it a statement instead of a question, keeping his face hardened in dislike and his tone flat, automatically crossing his arms.

"You've been speaking with the Red Hood." Oops. Caught. Batman didn't move, didn't continue. He only watched Dick.

"Yeah, and? What's it to you?" If this bastard thought he was going to get Dick to snitch on his own brother, he was about to have a really shitty night.

"You've also been in training to become his partner."

Dick froze.

That detail was something that hadn't left the warehouse. No one had seen Dick fight other than those goons by the docks, and they certainly weren't running to tell Batman about him. The only explanation was that Batman knew where they lived.

Anger bubbled up inside Dick. How dare he? The warehouse was their *home,* their safe place. How dare he ruin that?

He wanted to run at Batman and break his nose. Instead, he shrugged, glowering. "So?"

"The Red Hood is a very dangerous man, Dick," Batman said, stepping closer. "You don't know what you're getting yourself into."

Dick scoffed. "What, you mean the fact that he's killed? I know that, dumbass. I've seen it. *I don't care* . We're partners, and if anyone was going to convince me otherwise, it certainly wouldn't be you." Or anyone else.

Batman flinched back, and okay, *weird* . The man was supposed to

control fear itself, and here he was *flinching* ? Damn. Dick was less than impressed.

“Killing is not the way to stop crime, Dick. If you let yourself sink into your anger, if you allow it to consume you, you will become no better than your opponents. I know it’s easier to let the anger win, but you can’t. That’s what separates us from them.”

Now Batman was comparing Jason to a common criminal. Jesus, this guy had no tact. If he had eyes on the warehouse, he really should have known by now that insulting Dick’s little brother would only make him angrier.

“Maybe that’s how you think, but maybe you’re wrong. Have you ever considered that? Have you ever considered that there are people out there who deserve to be dead?” The Joker’s face floated to the surface of Dick’s mind. *Yes*, he thought to himself, *there’s a prime example*.

“Dick—” Batman stepped closer. Dick stepped back. “I know that you think you know Hood. I know he’s important to you. But he’s not the person from your memories. He’s changed. His experiences have warped him, turned him into something else.”

Dick clenched his hands into fists. This was too personal. Even if Batman knew his and Jason’s identities, their friendship had never been noticed by the public. No one ever knew Tim and Jason were unofficial Waynes. Only Bruce and Alfred had ever known. And Bruce—

No. Maybe Jason could come back, but Bruce wouldn’t. And if he did, he would never say shit like that about Jason.

“You don’t know shit,” he snarled at Batman, venom in every syllable. “You don’t know who I am. You don’t know who we are. We’re not bothering you, so leave us alone!”

“If you’re killing people, you’re bothering me.” Batman’s voice hardened. “I can’t allow murderers to remain on the streets.”

“Yeah? Murderers like the Joker? Putting them in Arkham doesn’t do shit, buddy. You put them in there and they sit for maybe three weeks before they’re out again, killing way more people than Hood ever has.” Batman said nothing. “You want to stop murderers? Look at the amount of people who have continued killing after Hood got to them, then compare that number to yours. Spot the difference.”

He stormed past Batman, bumping into his shoulder. It was like trying to shoulder-check a brick wall. “Don’t fucking follow me again,” he said over his shoulder. “It’s creepy as fuck.”

Shockingly, Batman didn’t follow him. Dick traveled back over the rooftops towards the safehouse. He ignored that familiarity in his stomach. It wasn’t real. That Night had happened, and Dick had lost his father. Dick had lost his second chance at a happy childhood, and there was no way he could have gotten it back, because Bruce was *dead* .

There was a reason everything went wrong, and that reason couldn’t unravel. If it did, Dick didn’t know what he’d do.

Chapter 17: Lost Bird, Worried

Chapter Notes

> Hello!!! I am very tired :) Here's the chapter, and just so you know, things are about to get painful! Not this one, but soon. Song for this one is Must Have Been the Wind by Alec Benjamin. Thank you all so much for the comments and kudos, they mean a ton!!
>
> No CW's for this chapter.
>
> Enjoy!!

Falling flat on your ass was embarrassing enough. Falling flat on your ass because your thirteen-year-old brother is now better at using a bo staff than you is even worse.

Tim stepped back, giving Jason time to regain his feet. Six weeks into training, and he had mastered every skill Jason taught him. They were sparring with padded bos, but Jason still had bruises from Tim's hits. His pride in his little brother's skills was not enough to stop Tim's constant apologies.

Jason had a feeling that if Tim knew how much more brutal training with the League had been, he would try to hunt Ra's down himself. The scary part about that was that he might actually *succeed* .

"That was great, Timmy," Jason huffed, shoving himself back to his feet. Both their faces shone with sweat after an hour of training. Tim's hair was stuck to his forehead, and Jason could only imagine he looked the same. "Seriously, you're even better than me now."

"There's got to be something else you can teach me." Tim bounced on the balls of his feet, expression hopeful.

Watching Tim learn to use the bo staff was almost mesmerizing. The two of them would train for a few hours a day, but Tim kept going after that. Jason and Dick watched him repeat the same move over and over again, making corrections to mistakes neither of them could see, until he could do it perfectly. Then he did it again.

"I don't know, baby bird. That's all I've learned. If you were going into the field with us, I'd say you were ready, but this is about as far as it

can go. We can only really keep sparring." *And about the only places you could learn more would be the League or Lady Shiva* , Jason considered adding, but he stopped himself. He wouldn't put it past Tim to seek out anyone who could teach him what he wanted to know.

"I could go out in the field with you," Tim said matter-of-factly. *I could go get the milk. I could help you wash the dishes.*

"No," Jason said. He grabbed his own bo from where he'd dropped it on the floor. "We've already talked about this, baby bird."

"But you just said I'm ready."

"I said you *would* be ready. If you were older." Jason went to put his bo back on the rack. He had a feeling training would be done for the day.

"Why does my age matter? If I'm capable and I can help, why shouldn't I help?" Agitation crept into Tim's voice. His logic was there, and Jason could follow it if he wasn't thinking emotionally, too.

He sighed and put an arm around Tim, pulling him close. Tim melted into the contact. "Baby bird, it's not about whether or not you're capable. It's about the fact that you're a kid, and I'm not letting you out there to fight in this city until you're at *least* as old as I am, but probably not until you're an adult. If a normal sixteen year old wanted to be a vigilante, I wouldn't let them do it either."

Tim didn't question why Jason wasn't normal. They both knew. Normal kids weren't resurrected after they were murdered. Normal kids didn't train to become an assassin. Normal kids didn't have a feeling in their blood that demanded death in exchange for life he hadn't asked for.

"But I can *help* ," Tim said again.

Jason ruffled his hair. "And you are, baby bird. As Specter. Robin and I need you to be our eyes and ears out there, and we wouldn't want anyone else to do it for you." When Tim didn't look convinced, he added, "And it *is* illegal, what you're doing. You're already a vigilante, even if you aren't out there fighting. You know, if knowing you're breaking the law too helps anything."

"Shut up." Tim shoved him affectionately, and Jason shoulder-checked him back.

A motorcycle's engine faded in from outside, and a few seconds later, Dick drove in. They'd made a small sort-of driveway leading to the warehouse's biggest door. Tim had set up a locking system with facial ID that could open the door automatically for the three of them, and since then, they'd kept the motorcycles in the warehouse instead of outside.

Dick parked and hooped off his bike, grabbing the groceries he'd been keeping in the sidecar(purchased two weeks ago for exactly that purpose. Tim refused to ride in it, and had begun trying to get Jason to teach him how to drive. This was because he knew Dick would never let him.).

"How's training?" he called as he began unpacking the groceries. Tim and Jason wandered over to help.

"Oh, you know, the baby bird's better than me with a bo, and now he wants to go out with us."

Tim shot him a reproving glare. Jason smirked and tilted his head in a silent, *you deserve the lecture* .

Looking up from the groceries, Dick fixed Tim with a look that was a mix of disappointment and sadness. "Timmy, we already talked about this."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm too young and you don't want me out there," Tim mumbled, focusing his attention on putting away the milk. "I get it." He said this in a tone that implied he did not in fact get it.

"Tim," Dick said. "It's not about how capable you are, or if we trust you, or even your age. It's that as your brothers, we need to keep you safe. We *want* to keep you safe. If you went out there and *died* —" his voice turned strained "—baby bird, we wouldn't be able to live with ourselves."

He blinked rapidly, and Jason quickly rounded the table to unload groceries next to him, shoulders pressed together Tim was looking at them with so much *confusion* , and goddammit did Jason want to fucking murder the Drakes for how worthless they'd made their child feel, for making *Tim* , brilliant and creative and earnest and determined Tim, of all people, feel like he was nothing if he wasn't useful. Like he wasn't worth protecting.

The worst part of it all was that Jason didn't know how to make him realize he was wrong. He could only stand by his brother and love

him with all his might, and hope that one day Tim would realize. It was all he could do, and yet…it *hurt* , not being able to do more.

Sometime soon, all three of them should really discuss going to therapy. Yeah. Healthy coping and all that. Definitely a goal to have.

Tim's phone dinged in his pocket, and he fished it out. Half a second later, the color drained from his face.

"Shit fucking hell," he said. "Dick, I need you to drive me to your place to get my bike."

"What? Why?" Dick straightened up, brows furrowing in Big Brother Concern Mode. Jason felt it too, tilting his head at Tim as he tried to puzzle out what had his brother spooked. "Is something wrong?"

"What? No." Even standing in front of them, Tim looked like he was a million miles away. His eyes were unfocused, darting regularly to his phone as he bounced on his feet. "I just need you to drive me. I forgot my parents were coming home today, and I'm supposed to be at the house and I'm not, and I told them I was trying out a new computer club but they're gonna get mad oh my god I forgot to order their groceries I put the reminder in my phone how did I forget they're gonna be so mad I can't—"

The words flowed from Tim's mouth in an unstoppable torrent as he wrung his hands. A million different tasks and inadequacies that, to Jason, sounded horrendously unreasonable. He went over to Tim and crouched until he was at eye level. He put a hand on Tim's shoulder. Tim's mouth snapped shut. "Sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for, baby bird," Jason said. Dick was next to him now, both of them at Tim's eye level. "We'll get you there, I promise. But are you alright?"

"Of course I'm alright." Tim began absentmindedly knocking on his head. "I just need to get home. Can one of you please drive me to Dick's so I can get my bike?"

At the drop of a hat, Tim's voice had turned closed off, though he still knocked on his head. Jason didn't know if he should reach out and stop him, or if it was better to let Tim get it out. It didn't seem to be hurting him.

"I can drive you, baby bird," Dick said. "Do you have your stuff?" Tim nodded. "We can leave now, then."

Everything in Jason screamed at him to not let Tim go to those shit excuses for parents, and he could tell Dick felt the same. What else could they do, though? They hadn't brought up trying to get Tim away from them. Jason was legally dead, so he couldn't even engage in a custody battle if they did decide to. There was nothing for them to do but let Tim go.

"Hold up. Baby bird, come here." Jason pulled Tim into one more hug, holding him tight like it might be the last time they'd ever see each other. It wasn't. He knew that. But…what if?

No. As he pulled away from the hug, keeping his hands on Tim's shoulders, Jason forced those thoughts out of his head.

"You contact us if you need anything, okay? And I mean *anything* . I don't care if you get kidnapped by the Riddler or you want a chocolate bar. We're here for anything you need, or anytime you want to talk, got it?" Dick nodded his agreement.

Tim shrugged and nodded, shrinking into himself. "Can we just go?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

It was going to be okay. It was going to be okay. Jason repeated the words in his head, but they never got more believable.

"Yeah," Dick said, sounding more tired than he had in weeks. "Let's go, baby bird."

"I love you," Jason said. "When they leave you can come right back."

"Yeah. Love you too." Tim gave him a little wave before booking it to the motorcycle. Jason and Dick exchanged looks that said, *we need to do something about this* , before Dick followed him.

As the motorcycle roared to life and sped out of the warehouse, Jason couldn't help but question if letting Tim leave was the right thing to do.

Chapter 18: Little Bird, Lost

Chapter Notes

> Good god this is a heavy one. Please pay attention to the CW's for this and don't read if it's going to hurt you. If it's any indication, the song for this chapter is How To Never Stop Being Sad by dandelion hands.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: intrusive thoughts, ableism, internalized ableism, mild suicidal ideation, substance abuse(alcohol), spiraling thoughts, bad parents
>
> I hope you like this one :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sweat covered Tim's entire body as he pedaled furiously along the road to Drake Manor. He was almost there. He could have been there already if he'd let Dick drive him, but his parents would be furious that he was speaking with a 'stranger'.

How could he have forgotten they were back today? It was so *stupid* of him. He had to get back before they were really mad. All the food in the pantry was his, specifically what he could eat. There was nothing in there to make a meal his parents would be happy with. Oh god.

The house came into view as Tim crested the final hill. Though his lungs were burning, he pedaled faster, gasping for breath as he sped towards the house. For once, lights were on inside. Did everyone feel dread like Tim when they saw lights on in their houses?

Tim hopped off his bike the moment he got into the driveway. He let it fall to the ground and sprinted for the front door, hauling it open.

The moment he crossed the threshold, Tim forced himself into a controlled walk. Back straight, forcing down the need for oxygen so he could breathe quietly through his nose, he hurried into the family room. "Hello, mother, father." Breathlessness made his voice thin and raspy. "I'm so sorry I was late, I just—"

"Timothy, can't you see we're busy?" Janet snapped. Tim stopped short and took in the room. It looked just the same as it always did, except for his mother and father sitting in front of a pile of paperwork on the coffee table. He shrunk back. Of course. He should have known

they would be working. He should never have interrupted them.

“Sorry, mother,” he said as he backed away, hands folded behind his back. “I’ll be in my room. The groceries should be delivered soon.” *After he ordered them in the first place.*

“They aren’t already here?”Jack asked,head swiveling around to fix Tim with a disapproving stare.

Tim wilted. “No. I’m sorry, it’s my fault.”

Jack just grunted and turned back to the paperwork with Janet. Neither of them said another word to Tim, so he turned and hurried away to his room.

This was how it always went with his parents. Tim would appear, only to be sent away until it was time to go out for public appearances. Then it was all smiles and handshakes and small talk that Tim never failed to fuck up. And, inevitably, he did something wrong that proved to his parents how *wrong* he was.

My god, what is wrong *with you?*

Just eat the food, Tim. You can’t leave the table until your room is clean.

No one wants to hear about your pictures, Tim. Be quiet or we’ll have a nanny come with you to all these events. Honestly, you’re ten years old. I expected you to be better by now.

Tim hit his head hard with his fist, over and over. *“Get out,”* he hissed, even as an ache bloomed beneath his hand. “Get out get out get out get out.”

The thoughts held onto him tight. It was like drowning in a storm; his fist made contact with his head, and for just a moment his head broke the surface, letting him take a breath. Then the spike of pain faded, and the waves forced him back under.

He was stupid, and a failure, and a disappointment, and *wrong* . God, everything was wrong with him. Tim didn’t mean to be such a fuck-up. He tried so hard to be good, to be *correct.* He didn’t know what was wrong with him. All he wanted was to get better.

A normal person would be crying right now, Tim thought bitterly. Normal people responded to high levels of emotional pain with tears. Not him, though. Tim, the little mutant that he was, curled up beneath

his weighted blanket, hit his head for the brief respite it gave him, and never shed a single one.

His parents didn't call for him until late the next day. Tim hadn't slept. Far away in their room on the third floor, his parents never noticed his trips to the kitchen for increasing amounts of coffee. Hidden away, he practiced combat skills with a piece of PVC pipe left over from an old project. It was unwieldy and unbalanced, but the movement helped ease some of the anxiety crawling under Tim's skin.

They didn't even come get him themselves. They sent him a text. The only reason Tim picked up his phone was because he'd set their numbers to a special sound so he'd know it was them. *Come downstairs* sat coldly above a dozen messages from Dick and Jason alike.

For a moment, Tim looked at the *how's it going* 's and *miss you'* s from his brothers and tried to imagine the feeling of their smiles.

Then he sent a *yes ma'am* back to his mom and did as he was told.

In the kitchen, his parents were sitting at the table, still engrossed in work. It took Tim clearing his throat for them to look up and notice him.

"Timothy," his mother said. "There's a gala you're coming with us to tonight."

"Hosted by Wayne Enterprises," his father added.

Since Bruce's death, Lucius Fox had taken over the company. He'd focused his efforts into improving Gotham, from funding hospitals to repaving roads. Of course, it required its fair share of fundraising. Every year—Tim really should have remembered by now—the Bruce Wayne Memorial Gala was held at the end of February. It was one of the biggest sources of funding WE had for its philanthropy. The Drakes always made an appearance, and that included their son.

Their stupid, useless son. No more real than a plastic doll.

"Oh," Tim said. His parents' expressions flattened like they'd expected him to come up with something more intelligent, but Tim genuinely didn't know what else to say. There was a gala. He was going. End of story.

“And?” his mother asked.

“And what?”

Oh, they really didn’t like that. Janet’s face pinched in annoyance while Jack’s eyes narrowed.

“And, you will need to be ready by seven o’clock,” Jack said slowly, like Tim wouldn’t comprehend him unless he dumbed it down. Tim hated it. “You’ll wear your gray suit with the blue tie. Your hair will be fixed. You will have *appropriate* , *short* , and *interesting* stories to exchange with other people. And for God’s sake, so something about your eyes. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” Ducking his head, Tim spun an hurie away, breaking into a run as soon as he was out of earshot.

Stupid stupid stupid worthless idiot empty incapable shell pointless die die die why are you like this why don’t they care what did I do die hurt go away I want to stop help why does it hurt why can’t I feel anything go away help need something die idiot stupid fuck up fucked up go away go away die just leave pointless do them a favor go away shut up go away why am I wrong wrong wrong go away stop stupid pointless worthless fuck up empty

The thoughts hadn’t been this bad since…well, since the last time his parents came home. They always got worse when he was around them. At least they were only here for tonight and flying out tomorrow. Tim could manage that. He could do it. And afterwards…

There were always options for afterwards.

He found his gray suit in the back of his closet, hanging in its garment bag. The fabric rubbed against his skin like sandpaper when he pulled the pants on, leaving the coat for the absolute last minute. Tim wanted to remove it and take a long, scalding shower, until the sensation of it on his skin washed away. He didn’t.

In the bathroom, Tim ran his hands under water before dragging them through his hair. Dick and Jason had been reminding him to shower and take care of himself, and it had helped a lot with his general wellbeing. He finger-combed it back and parted it down the middle so

it framed his face. His hair was shaggy and came down to his ears, and Tim had been cutting it himself since he was ten. Alfred used to help him when he was friends with the Waynes. He was the only person besides himself that Tim could bear holding clippers near his head.

While his hair dried, Tim retrieved a thing of concealer from behind his toothbrush. It only ever got used when his parents came home. Similarly, Tim never seemed to realize just how dark his under-eyes were until his parents reprimanded him for it. The makeup was cold as he dabbe it beneath his eyes and used his finger to blend it in. It didn't do much to help his appearance.

Tim found himself almost ready a few minutes before seven rolled around. Before he went to meet his parents, he added a few final touches to help himself as much as he could. From his desk drawer, he pulled out a pack of disposable earplugs. They were the foam kind you could buy cheap at the drugstore. Outside in Gotham, Tim could manage noise. Inside a venue, hundreds of voices and laughs bouncing off the walls into a din of suffocating sound, however, was a different story. Tim slipped the earbuds in and let his hair hide them. Before pulling on his coat, he put on his usual jacket that he wore everywhere. Its weight around his shoulders gave him the barest impression of safety.

"Timothy!" his mother called sharply from downstairs. Tim jumped. He hadn't noticed time running out. Shoving a marble ball trap fidget into his pocket, he hurried downstairs to meet his parents' scrutinizing gazes.

"Hurry up, we don't have time for you to waste," Janet snapped. She and Jack led the way out with Tim trailing them, practicing his Gala Walk and the pleasantly neutral expression unique to Gotham's elite.

A silent limo ride left them at the venue's entrance. The moment they got inside, Tim was abandoned to wander alone while his parents worked the room. Of course, he had his own responsibilities. Whenever someone came up, he smiled and talked until they were happy. It never took long. No one was really interested in Tim Drake. They were interested in Jack and Janet Drake thinking they were friendly and good prospective business partners.

Sound pressed in on him from all sides, as tangible as the tipsy

socialites bumping into him. The earbuds helped, but ultimately nothing could keep the noise out permanently. As it grew, so did Tim's thoughts, but he couldn't hit his head here. When he was five, that was the kind of behavior he got yelled at for. People had called him crazy. They'd suggested Arkham. Even the news had gotten ahold of it: *Drake Industries Heir Mad?*

Wrong wrong stupid pointless wrong stop it go away go away die hurt not their fault you're wrong everyone stop stop it go away leave me alone DON'T TOUCH ME please sorry stop go away I hate it I hate myself stupid pointless worthless wrong not real go away make it stop you can make it stop makie it stop

Tim could make it stop. He knew how.

Something a lot of people didn't know was that the legal drinking age wasn't exactly enforced at galas. Wait staff weren't the most observant people, and even if they were, no one wanted to get screamed at by rich people for denying their child what they wanted. It was even easier for Tim, forgettable as he was.

Adopting a relaxed stance with one hand in his pocket, Tim faked a lazy smile as he set a path towards a waiter. They barely glanced twice at the short kid snagging a flute of champagne before continuing on their way. Sighing with relief, Tim took a careful sip. Never swig, never drink. That was how you get called an alcoholic.

The alcohol didn't burn going down so much as it sat warm in his stomach, fading a few moments before the peachy aftertaste. When it did, Tim took another sip. And another.

He didn't drink more than one flute. That was a rule he kept for himself. No one would like him getting shit-faced in public, and neither would Tim. Talk about embarrassing. But the longer the alcohol sat, absorbing into his bloodstream, the more relaxed Tim got. He could exchange small talk more easily. People seemed less hostile. His smile became just the tiniest bit more real.

Tim became just the tiniest bit more human.

At some point during the night, Mr. Fox made a speech. Tim didn't register a lot of it. There were things about Bruce, how much he'd loved the city, how he'd wanted it to be better.

Ha, Tim thought with a little smirk, *maybe Bruce had been Batman .*

But no, Batman was alive, and Bruce was dead. Batman was also a bitchy furry, from what Dick had told Tim of their meeting. Bruce wouldn't be a bitchy furry. The thought alone almost made Tim giggle out loud.

Of course, though, the alcohol took as much as it gave, and eventually Tim made a mistake. His parents found him in the middle of a spirited infodump about the origins of the bo staff to a random partygoer who'd asked the wrong question.

"Timothy," his dad said sharply, interrupting Tim's explanation of why certain woods were better than others by planting a firm hand on his shoulder, "Why are you bothering this nice man?"

Tim jumped and snapped his mouth shut, ducking his head with a mumbled apology. The man had already forgotten about him though, assuring his parents that it was, 'no trouble', and, 'your son is very bright, Mr. and Mrs. Drake', and, 'have you heard about my new business venture in Egypt?'.

His parents engaged in polite conversation and exchanged contacts with the man before steering Tim away and outside, herding him towards the car. They didn't say anything, and they didn't have to. The icy silence filling the car was more than enough information to let Tim know how much he'd fucked up.

Useless worthless fuck up go away stupid idiot they don't want you what did I do wrong you did everything go away wrong no yes stop die die break make it stop stupid go away pointless idiot stupid idiot you're nothing you're wrong wrong wrong they don't want you who would want you go away fuck up fucked up wrong miserable nothing stupid idiot can't even talk right why am I like this why am I wrong go away you're nothing stupid go away go away worthless pointless wrong

Tim knew by the time they got home that he wouldn't be hearing his parents' voices directe at him again for the rest of their visit. He bid

them goodnight when he got inside and hurried upstairs. Shirking his clothes the moment he got into his room, Tim kicked them into a corner and jumped in the shower, letting hot water scald away the fabric of the suit. The heat left his skin tender and pink, but he didn't care. He jumped into bed wearing a pair of Jason's pajamas that had ended up in his bag.

Galas and other big events were the few nights he could reliably get some sleep. Tim was out the moment he closed his eyes.

When he woke up, it was to a spotless room with the curtains open. Tim never left the curtains open. More importantly, his room was never spotless.

Squinting against the sunlight, he stumbled to draw the curtains closed again, holding them in place with binder clips.

Without the light in his eyes, Tim found the notecard on his dresser. It was written in Janet's spidery cursive.

Your room was filthy. We had the maid clean it. She found that ratty jacket with your suit and threw it out. It should have been disposed of years ago. As you know, we're going to a dig in Turkey. We will be back in December.

- *Mother*

All the information in the letter dissolved into background noise as Tim zeroed in on the third sentence.

That ratty jacket.

Threw it out .

No. They hadn't. That was *Tim's* jacket. That was *his jacket* . It belonged to him. No one else was supposed to touch it. They weren't supposed to get rid of it. Tim *needed* it.

The emptiness warred with panic rising in Tim's mind, combining into a whirlwind that blocked out every other thought. His jacket was gone. He needed that jacket. It was *his.* They didn't take it. They did

take it. It was gone.

Worthless stupid disappointment go away go away go away wrong fuck up fucked up dumbass baby selfish worthless go away why did they take it go away stop make it stop make it stop you can make it stop make it stop you can make it stop just FEEL SOMETHING YOU USELESS FUCK

Like he'd said. There were always options for afterwards.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for all the pain :(((but this was still fun to write I've been waiting for this for a bit. Thank y'all for the comments and kudos, they mean a lot! Feel free to scream in the comments about this.

Chapter 19: Lost Bird, Remembering

Chapter Notes

> MORE PAIN, I swear it'll start getting a little better after this chapter though. They'll get some happy feelings soon. Tbh, I could make a whole playlist for this chapter alone, but a good song for it is It's Alright by Mother Mother. Fun fact, I found that song through someone I met in therapy and listened to it on repeat for five hours the first time I heard it. Also, do you ever have a shower idea for an animatic but you can't draw so your mind does a rapid 180 to a fic? Anyways now I want to write an au about Tim becoming a Red Hood figure after Jason's death because he's angry at Batman for not saving him or getting revenge on the Joker, and how Jason reacts when he finds out about him. I want the theme song to be Brutal by Olivia Rodrigo.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: trauma, flashbacks, panic, alcohol abuse, underage drinking, mentions of parental death to overdosing
>
> Enjoy! :) (it feels really weird to type that knowing how fucking angsty this chapter is)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They hadn’t heard from Tim in three days. That was okay. That was fine. It was all downright fucking dandy, Jason thought, except for the fact that his parents’ departure to Turkey was publicized at seven thirty that morning. Now, Jason wasn’t stupid. He knew that no matter how hurtful as Tim’s parents were, his little brother would still be loyal to them. That was how Tim worked. Jack and Janet Drake were his family, and so Tim loved them.

He also knew that Tim would never be in his house alone if he could be with Dick and Jason instead. Back at Wayne Manor, the two of them would wait up every time the Drakes came home. Tim always knew when they were leaving before their flight touched the ground. At that time, be it the dead of night or the middle of a school day, Jason and Dick would be waiting for him in the living room with Mario Kart and eggs on toast. Tim liked routine. Being able to count on his chosen family to be there after a stressful time with his biological one was a comfort to him.

The Manor was locked now, of course. Jason and Dick hadn't waited on a couch for a long time. But when the news appeared that the Drakes had left, Dick went to set up the Switch Jason had, and Jason had set up shop in the kitchen. By eight, they were waiting for Tim to reply to Dick's offer of a pick-up.

At eight fifteen, they were still waiting.

And at nine.

And at ten thirty.

By eleven, enough nervous energy had collected under Jason's skin to set him pacing, hands itching for something to do.

"We should go check on him," he said.

Many people in this scenario would say something like *give him time,* or *he's probably asleep still* . Dick, sitting with his face pressed into his hands at the kitchen table, did not say that. He knew as well as Jason that Tim barely slept, let alone slept *in* . He also didn't leave his brothers without an answer for hours at a time. Grabbing his keys, Dick stood. "Agreed."

Tim was okay, Jason tried to convince himself while they drove, both pushing sixty on the fifty mile an hour highway, engines roaring in their ears. This time they had bothered with helmets. Tim's was in Dick's sidecar, decorated with glossy black paint and red highlights. He had to be. No one knew who he was, who *they* were. Tim wasn't kidnapped. Tim was at home. Tim was safe.

A memory came unbidden into Jason's mind, manic laughter ringing in his ears. Phantom aches appeared on his body. *Will anyone miss you, kiddo?*

There was a piece of debris in the road and Jason couldn't breathe and he didn't want to die. He swerved harshly, tires screeching against cement. He couldn't do this. Pulling to the side of the road, he turned off the motorcycle and stumbled backwards, one hand holding desperately to the helmet on his head.

The laughing wouldn't stop. Every time this happened, Jason could listen to music to drown it out, or go beat criminals up to remind himself that he wasn't *helpless* anymore. But his kid brother was at the other end of this drive and Jason couldn't run away when Tim might be in danger, might need help, might be with *him* —

A child's cries replaced the laughter. Jason had never heard them before, but he knew all the same that they belonged to Tim. He was hurting Tim, hitting him with the crowbar when it should have been Jason, should have been him there instead, but he'd done it wrong and now Tim was hurt and it was all his fault.

Logically, he knew the way to fix this was to save Tim. He had to find his little brother, wherever the Joker may have taken him, and save him. But he *couldn't move* . No matter how hard he tried, Jason could only cower on the side of the highway. God, he was failing his brother. He was abandoning Tim all over again.

"Jay!" A hand landed on his shoulder and Jason jerked back, stumbling as he tripped over a large stone. Belatedly, he registered the voice as Dick's, and his brother's features solidified into the blurry figure standing in front of him.

Jason took a few more steps back. *Don't touch me* , he wanted to say, but all that came out was a choked whimper. He should be able to protect himself. This shouldn't be happening.

It was happening, though, and he was helpless. Again.

Dick got the message Jason was trying to convey. He lifted his hands so Jason could see them, taking half a step back. "Jason, do you know where you are?"

The highway. He was on the highway, and Jason knew he was on the highway, but the words wouldn't come out.

"Okay. Okay." Dick's eyes were dark with fear. "It's fine if you can't talk, Jay. It's absolutely fine. Can you try to breathe for me? I can count for you."

Breathe. He could do that. Jason forced a tiny nod.

"Okay. In, one, two, three, four. Out, one, two, three, four." Dick repeated the count and Jason followed, sucking in air and forcing it out. In and out, in and out, reality slowly solidifying back to its true state. It didn't lessen the fear, but it let Jason focus again.

When Dick apparently deemed him calm enough, he dropped his hands and came closer. "Jay, do you want to tell me what happened there?" His voice was gentle and soothing. It sounded so damn *brotherly* . Jason really didn't want to talk, though, and even if he did, it was a waste of time. Nothing was more important than getting to

Tim.

“We’ve got to go,” he said hoarsely and went back to his bike, starting the motor and pulling back onto the road before Dick was halfway through his reply. He sped off towards Drake Manor, giving his brother no choice but to follow.

Drake Manor looked like a mausoleum, dark and stiff. It had the grandness of the upper echelons and not an ounce of life to give it warmth. Jason let his bike fall to the grass when he pulled up in favor of dashing to the front door. Knocking wasn’t important, getting in was. While Dick climbed off his own bike—Jason had gotten ahead of him by several minutes through the drug known as panic and desperation—, Jason dug a set of lockpicks from his pocket and got to work on the lock.

“Why do you have those?” Dick asked. He was still visibly shaken from the incident on the highway. As guilty as he was, Jason didn’t have time for reassuring him right now. He had to get Tim to safety.

“To pick locks,” he replied as he swung the door open. Not bothering to clean up the lockpicks—it wasn’t like the Drakes were there to notice—, he ran for the stairs, yelling Tim’s name. Bedrooms were usually on upper floors.

Slamming door after door open did nothing but increase Jason’s fear. Each room was nothing but furniture covered in drop cloths without any sign that people—one person—were in the house. *No wonder Tim’s so hollow in a house like this* , Jason thought, and the words stuck like peanut butter in his throat until he finally found Tim’s room.

It was just as spotless as the rest of the house, save for the nest of gray bed clothes that had been dragged off the bed and onto the floor. Tim sat in the middle of them with his back leaned against the bed frame. He was wearing the pajamas Jason had snuck into his bag and staring blearily ahead.

“Tim?” Jason asked. The knot in his stomach loosened just barely, because while Tim may have been safe, something was obviously wrong.

Tim tilted his head to look at him, a dreamy smile floating onto his face. *Wrong, wrong, wrong* , Jason’s instincts whispered. His brother’s eyes were glassy and wide, looking around like he wasn’t processing

half of what he was saying. “Hey, Jay.” His voice was happy, but it was over-sweet, too smooth and too fluid for Tim’s voice.

As Dick’s steps approached from behind him, a whole new horror filled Jason, because he’d seen this before.

It hadn’t been alcohol then. It had been heroin, finding a needle in the bathroom, coming home from school to his mom on the couch with a blissed out smile, barely coherent but so *happy* , even as the drug destroyed her.

Never again, Jason had thought when the ambulance took her, concealed by a body bag. Never again would he lose someone to a substance.

But his baby brother was sitting on the floor with an empty bottle next to him, and his little body was swaying and he was smiling and Jason just wanted to run away and scream because please anyone but *Tim* . Anyone but his brother, either of them.

Emotions behind a barrier, Jason walked into the room only to grab the bottle. Dick followed him in and sat in front of Tim. It only took one shared glance for them to communicate.

Leaving the two of them alone, Jason wandered until he found the kitchen. When he did, he poured the last bits of bourbon—bourbon, Jason’s thirteen year old brother was drinking *bourbon* —down the sink, then tossed the bottle in the trash. All the way back to the room, he kept his mind carefully blank.

Tim was curled up in Dick’s lap when he returned, happily babbling about nothing coherent. When he saw Jason, he reached out for him. “You’re back!”

All Jason had wanted was for Tim to be happy. Why did every one of his wishes always twist against him?

Still, he sat next to Dick and let Tim take his hand, pulling his arm across his chest and leaning his head on Jason’s shoulder. “I missed you,” he said.

“I missed you too, baby bird.” A painful lump had appeared in Jason’s throat. It turned his words thick and hoarse. Tim’s pale face was flushed with alcohol. In a twisted way, he looked like he’d just gotten inside from playing in the snow.

“Timmy,” Dick said in a voice just louder than a whisper, “What happened?”

“Oh, the usual.” Tim shrugged, waving his arm around in a *you-get-what-I-mean* gesture. “I came back, I fucked up. We went to the gala, I fucked up. We came home and they left and they threw out my jacket.”

Tears welled in Tim’s eyes, but instead of crying, he started to laugh. Loud, harsh, hysterical scream-laughing that grated against Jason’s ears. It wasn’t Him, he forcibly reminded himself. It didn’t stop thoughts from entering his head— *Aren’t you having fun, sport?*— , but it let him stay with Tim.

“I fucked up so bad I don’t even know what I did,” Tim gasped between laughs. Dick wrapped his arms tighter around their brother, blinking quickly as he avoided eye contact with either of them.

“You didn’t fuck up, Timmy,” he murmured, choking on tears Jason knew he wouldn’t shed.

“Of course I did.” The matter of factness that belonged to Tim was there, the simplicity of *this is how the world works and I see it perfectly* , no matter how distorted his view really was. “I don’t talk right, and I don’t think right, and I don’t feel right—” he coughed, tears spilling down his cheeks. “—fuck, I can’t even *feel* at all.” He turned to Jason, eyes barely focusing on him. “I’m sorry, Jay. I didn’t mean to hurt you, I promise.”

He didn’t have to explain what he’d done. All three of them knew. After all, they’d gone with Jason to his mother’s funeral.

“It’s okay, baby bird,” he whispered, squeezing Tim’s hand.

It wasn’t okay. They all knew that. This wasn’t how Tim should be dealing with things, and now that Jason and Dick knew, they couldn’t let it keep happening. Jason couldn’t lose anyone else. But Tim was hurting, and Jason knew what that felt like. When you were in pain, you would do anything to stop the voices. Jason had learned to do it through his fists. Tim had learned to do it quietly.

“I’m sorry,” Tim repeated again. He was still looking at Jason, and the longer they kept eye contact, the more the sadness in Tim’s eyes grew. “I just wanted to feel something,” he said softly, almost pleadingly. The tears fell faster, dripping off his chin and onto Dick’s shirt.

Jason reached out and carded his fingers through Tim's hair. Tim leaned into the touch; his eyes closed, and he didn't see Jason squeeze his eyes shut tight as he whispered, "It's alright, baby bird." He smoothed Tim's hair back from his forehead. "It's alright."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the pain!!! Big thank you for all the comments and kudos! They are very awesome :))

Chapter 20: Lonely Bird, Reeling

Chapter Notes

> There's healing in this one, I promise. Things are gonna get a bit better now. Song for this one is The Kids Aren't Alright by Fall Out Boy. Thank you all for the comments and kudos!
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: mentioned alcohol abuse
>
> Enjoy! :)

Tim had ridden back to the warehouse in Dick's sidecar, falling asleep barely halfway through the drive. When they pulled into the building, Jason got off his bike and lifted Tim bridle style. Their little brother's head rested on Jason's chest as he carried him to his bed and tucked him in.

Knowing Jason was taking care of Tim left Dick with plenty of freedom to spiral. Sitting on the couch by the TV, he let his head drop into his hands, shame crashing over him in wave after wave of horrible guilt.

He should have known this would happen. Jack and Janet Drake were somehow the worst parents to never parent, and he had willingly left Tim alone with him for four years. No wonder Tim's mental health had gotten so bad. That house was a fucking tomb. Walking in it had made Dick nervous to speak, let alone do anything a normal person would do in their home. The place was a museum, and the Drakes had left their son to walk its halls until he became just another artifact lost inside.

Dick could have saved him from that. If only he'd come back when he said he would, marched up to that door the moment he was freed from the system and took his brother back, whisking him away to a home where he would be loved and cared for. He had done this. As mad as he was at Tim's parents, he had become exactly the same as them.

"Alright, I can hear you hating yourself from over here. Come on, get up." Jason's combat boots appeared in Dick's line of sight. He lifted his head wearily to find his brother standing over him with his arms crossed, a box of hair dye in one hand. "I'm re-dying your hair for you."

“When did you even get that?” Dick asked halfheartedly. There was an unrelenting determination in Jason’s eyes, the kind that told him this was happening whether he wanted to get up or not.

“I grabbed it when it was my turn to buy groceries. Your hair looks like mold. I figured you’d want a change.” Jason lightly kicked Dick’s shin. “Come on. No wallowing, only hair dye.”

They set up shop in the kitchen so they could keep watch over Tim. For the past few months, they’d been growing increasingly aware of their need for privacy, so they’d ordered some curtains to hang and separate their sleeping spaces. Those weren’t due to come for the next few days, though, so open floor plan it was.

In his bed, Dick’s baby brother looked positively tiny. They had always called him baby bird, but right now, Tim looked as fragile as if he’d been born yesterday.

His face was still swollen from the tears. Curled tightly around a pillow, he took up barely half the bed.

It was all Dick’s fault.

“Why’d you let it get to this color?” Jason wrinkled his nose, pinching a bit of Dick’s hair while he inspected it.

Dick shrugged. “I couldn’t afford to get it dyed again.” The dye had been an impulse decision a few months after getting his own apartment. He’d had his own space, his own job, his own life, but it didn’t feel like enough. So Dick had found the cheapest hairstylist in Gotham and gotten the tips of his hair dyed blue.

It hadn’t been pretty. The bleach had fired his hair to a crisp, and as it washed out, the dye turned a sickly greenish-white. Despite going months at a time between haircuts, half of the original dyed part was still there.

Jason hummed understandingly as he mixed up the bleach. Wrapping a towel around Dick’s neck, he began to paint it carefully onto his hair, separating the strands so each one got coated in the chemical. “So. What are we gonna do?”

There it was. This was obviously the conversation they were heading towards. Jason had given himself something to do with his hands, given Dick a subtle way to get physical contact, and given both of them a way to avoid looking the other in the eye. It didn’t make him

want to run for the rooftops any less.

“We need to talk to him about it,” Dick said.

“I know that. But we can’t just walk in without any sort of plan. You know he’ll say anything to defend those shitsacks pretending to be parents. If we try to get him to leave them he’ll run.”

“So we don’t ask him to leave them.” Jason covered the bits of bleached hair in foil and set a timer on his phone before leaning back on the counter. “We don’t know everything, Jay—”

“We know enough. He can’t go back to them.” Anger colored Jason’s voice. Even without looking at him, Dick could tell he was watching Tim, searching for any sign that the alcohol was hurting him.

“I know, Jaybird. Believe me, I know.” And God, he did. How dare they? How dare the Drakes leave Tim, sweet, brilliant, loving Tim, alone in that house. How dare they take their son for granted? “But like you said, he’ll run. We need to understand the situation, figure out what’s wrong. Obviously he needs therapy.”

Jason snorted. “We all need therapy.”

He wasn’t wrong there.

“We’ll all look into getting it, then. But you and Tim definitely need it as a high priority.”

Dick could sense Jason stiffen without looking at him. “Why me?” His tone was flat and empty. Shutting down.

“Jay, we can’t pretend what happened on the highway didn’t happen.”

“It’s fine.”

“It really isn’t. Jaybird, you went through a lot of bad shit. It makes sense for it to be affecting you still. There’s nothing wrong with that, or you. But if it’s hurting you, you need to get help for it.”

For a few long moments, Jason was silent. Then he said, “The bleach should be done.”

Dick allowed Jason to wash the product from his hair in the sink, then towel away excess water so he could begin actually dying the hair before he continued.

“Jason, you can’t pretend the things that happened don’t affect you.”

“That’s because I’m not pretending,” Jason replied.

“People who aren’t hurting don’t get flashbacks in the middle of the road, Little Wing.”

“And?” Aggressively scrunching a bit of foil over Dick’s hair, Jason stepped away. “This isn’t about me right now. This is about Tim. He needs help, and until he gets it, we don’t have time to think about my problems.”

“There’s enough room for both of your problems, Jaybird,” Dick said. “We don’t get to take shifts on who’s trauma deserves attention. That’s not how our brains work.”

“I don’t care. I’m not going to waste time and end up losing him. I’m not fucking losing him again.” Jason’s voice cracked, and Dick knew he was talking about more than just Tim. Standing up, he circled around the chair to pull Jason into a hug. At first, Jason just sat in his arms like a piece of wood. Slowly, though, his hands came up to grab handfuls of Dick’s shirt as he relaxed into the hug, pressing his face into Dick’s shoulder.

“We’re not losing him, Jay,” Dick whispered. “I promise.”

“You can’t promise that.”

Tears rushed to Dick’s eyes. He could barely hold them back, because Jason was right.

When he was younger and just starting to learn trapeze, Dick had been scared. Watching his parents fly made it seem like the most natural thing in the world. Swinging through the air, they had looked like birds. Only when he was standing on the platform alone did Dick realize: he did not have wings.

His parents had understood. They’d hugged him when he climbed back down the ladder on shaky legs, reassuring him that everything would be okay.

Learning to fly was never easy , Dick’s mom had said. *But if you fall, the net will always catch you.*

Will it catch you too? Dick had asked.

Of course. His dad ruffled his hair. *But we're Graysons, Dick. Once you learn to fly, you'll never fall again .*

There had been no net to catch them that night.

"I know," he murmured softly, choking on his tears. "I know. But we're going to try. If anything wants to take him away, it'll have to kill us first."

Jason let out a watery laugh. "Damn right."

Releasing him from the hug, Dick lifted a hand to his foil wrapped hair. "You think the color's soaked in yet?"

"Yeah, probably. Come on, I'll wash it out for you."

"Maybe you should get your hair dyed," Dick suggested as he leaned over the sink.

"How?" Jason asked.

"I dunno. Maybe a white streak, or something."

"Sure. Maybe another time."

Chapter 21: Little Bird, Learning

Chapter Notes

> Sorry this one's short! I need to start writing earlier in the day, I'm always getting super tired by the end of these. Anyway, enjoy! :)
>
> No CW's for this chapter

When Tim woke up, it was to a splitting headache and the memory of what came after alcohol's high. He groaned as he rolled over. Light stabbed his eyes and he pressed his hands against them, regretting everything.

God, he'd fucked up. Tim hadn't been so drunk that he'd forgotten what happened, but he wished he did. He remembered Jason and Dick finding him in his room. He remembered whining about how pathetic he was before passing out in Dick's arms.

As awareness returned to him, he registered that he was in his bed back at the safe house.

Shit.

Tim rolled out of bed. His headache pounded with every apprehensive step he took towards the kitchen, where his brothers were waiting for him.

"Hey, Timbird," Dick said when he reached them. He was clutching a cup of coffee like it was his lifeline. Tim knew the feeling. Dropping into a seat at the table, he mumbled back an incoherent greeting.

Jason stepped over and put a plate piled with scrambled eggs and grapes in front of Tim's face. "Eat," he said as he brought over a mug of coffee. "I bet you didn't have anything to eat today."

There was an unspoken disappointment there. All three of them had had the substance unit in school, and all three of them knew what could help balance the effects of alcohol. Tim hadn't been thinking about responsibility this morning. He hadn't been thinking much of anything.

Looking outside at the darkened windows sent guilt crawling in Tim's gut. "You guys should be out on patrol," he said.

“Not tonight, Timmy,” Dick said. “You need us more than the city does.”

“No I don’t,” Tim protested quickly. “I can take care of myself.”

“We found you in your room drunk out of your mind. You don’t get to make that decision anymore,” Jason snapped. Immediately, Tim’s mouth snapped shut. His eyes dropped to the table. He should have realized how Jason would react. How could he say it any differently, after what happened to his mother? He was so fucking *selfish* . “Sorry, Tim. I’m just scared.”

Tim looked up. “What?”

Jason’s eyes were downcast, his arms crossed protectively over his chest as he leaned back on the counter. He scuffed the toe of his boot against the ground. “Baby bird, you know how my mom died. I don’t want you to go the same way. I know it’s not your fault. You wouldn’t be drinking unless something was making you feel really, really bad. But that doesn’t stop me from being scared.”

The only thing wrong in that statement was that Tim was drinking because he felt bad. The real reason was because he felt nothing at all. Still guilt-ridden, he picked up his fork and began to eat the meal in front of him.

“Tim,” Dick said, “Do you want to talk about why you did that this morning?” *That* . Not drank, not abused substances. Just *that* .

“I…” Really, Tim didn’t want to talk about it. He knew Dick and Jason were upset. They didn’t need an explanation for what he’d done; nothing would make it better. Tim just wanted to know if they would let him stay or not. “They threw out my jacket.”

Understanding dawned in Jason’s eyes. “The one you always wear? The one that’s falling apart?”

“Yeah, that one. I—” the itch returned beneath Tim’s skin. “—I *need* my jacket. I can’t explain it, but I need it.”

“We believe you, Tim.” Dick put a comforting hand on Tim’s shoulder, eyes gentle and honest. “We’ll see what we can do about getting it back.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem, baby bird.”

“Another thing.” Jason pushed off from the counter and came to take the seat opposite Tim. “You said this morning that you wanted to feel something. Do you want to tell us some more about that?”

Tim shrugged. What was there to say? He felt empty, end of story. There was nothing there to describe.

“If you’re feeling like that, Tim,” Dick said, taking his own seat between Jason and Tim so that their chairs formed a triangle, “Then we should talk about having you see a therapist.”

No . No, no, no, no. Tim knew the mental health system in Gotham. He knew how it worked, everyone did. You go to the therapists, and the moment you say anything they don’t like, you get shipped off to Arkham to lose your mind next to every sad soul in the city.

Or, not every sad soul. Just the ones dumb enough to talk about it.

“You can’t send me to therapy,” Tim pleaded. “I’m not crazy.”

“Of course you’re not crazy, Tim.” Jason frowned. “But there’s something wrong. You were on your own for a long time, baby bird. That’s not healthy, especially not for developing kids.”

“I’m fine,” Tim repeated desperately. “I wasn’t alone. The housekeeper came every week, and I went to school in the beginning, and I was out all night in Gotham.” Both of his brothers winced, but Tim couldn’t bring himself to care. “Please, I don’t want to go to Arkham.”

“Arkham? Tim, you’re not going to Arkham,” Dick said.

“That’s where they’ll send me if you make me go. And my parents will never get me out. They’ll just cover it up. I’ll leave if you want, but I can’t go there.” Tim stood, ready to bolt. His heart pounded in his chest, a steady rhythm matching his mind’s chant of *run, run, run* .

“Then we won’t send you to a Gotham therapist,” Dick said. He lifted his hands placatingly, exchanging a concerned glance with Jason. “We’ll find one in another city and drive you there.”

Tim backed up a few steps, still not trusting them. Jason tensed. “Do you promise?”

“On Dick’s life, baby bird,” Jason said, crossing his heart.

“On Jason’s,” Dick agreed.

Ok. They’d never bullshit a promise on each other’s lives. Tim began to relax, taking a tiny step back towards them. “Do we have to go right now?”

“Not right now, baby bird,” Dick said. “We’ll need to find one first, and you’ve had a lot of excitement. For now, we’re just gonna take it easy.”

Hope rose in Tim’s chest. “Will you guys go out on patrol?”

“Not tonight,” Jason said. Tim’s shoulders dropped. “But we know the old man’s out there taking care of it, even if we’re obviously the best vigilantes in the city.”

“There’s not a lot to choose from.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’re the best. Now, Timmy, do you still like beating Dick at Mario Kart?”

“Hey!” Dick squawked. “I’ve beat you hundreds of times!”

“If that’s what you want to tell yourself, Robin.” Standing up, Jason tossed an arm around Tim’s shoulders and led him to the couch. A Switch was set up by the TV with three controllers on the coffee table. “We’re gonna kick your ass.”

Tim allowed himself to be guided to a seat, leaning against Jason with Dick leaning against him. The clock showed that it was past two a.m., but they turned on the game anyway. Soon, the weight of everything faded just enough from Tim’s mind that he could bring himself to smile as his brothers laughed. He could handle this. He just needed time.

Chapter 22: Lost Bird, FUCKING SHIT BATMAN'S ANGRY

Chapter Notes

> HELLO. Do y'all like the chapter title? I do. We finally got all three of them being vigilantes together, so that's awesome. Song for this is Enemy by Imagine Dragons. Thank you guys all so much for the comments and kudos on the last chapter, they were awesome!
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: fighting, death, mentions of abuse, mentions of substance abuse
>
> Enjoy!!

Tonight was the first night Jason and Dick had gone on patrol since finding Tim two days ago. They'd allowed him to be on comms, mainly because both of them wanted to be able to hear his voice. Recently, Jason's nightmares had expanded to include Tim vanishing into thin air. He really fucking hated his brain sometimes.

Dick hadn't brought up the flashback again, which was fine with Jason. He knew that dying had fucked him up—fork seen in kitchen, obviously. That wasn't something that was supposed to happen. But it had, and Jason just had to deal with the consequences. The trauma was nothing compared to the bloodlust, anyway.

"Can we get pizza after this?" Dick asked.

They were heading to stop a drug deal at the ports that Tim had found. Dick was in his new uniform—black bodysuit with less armor to give him more flexibility, a red bird splashed across the chest and a black domino over his face. It clashed horribly with his hair, but Jason hadn't brought it up yet.

Jason grinned as he leapt a gap between roofs. "Sure, why not?"

"You'll bring some back for me, right?" Tim asked.

"I don't know, Specter, I'm pretty hungry," Dick said. Fair. They had been running around Gotham fighting people for the past two hours. Jason was always hungry after patrols.

Tim whined at them to bring him pizza as they neared the docks, but quieted down once they reached the deal.

It was the standard setup. Two groups, guns and suits, cash and product. Jason and Dick crouched behind a shipping container, waiting for money to change hands. They had to wait for their lenses to capture the evidence, or the police would just let them go. Of course, they might still let them go, if the officers were as corrupt as Jason knew they were, but a guy could hope.

The person wearing a gray suit passed over a briefcase to the man in a black one. He popped it open, and there it was. A pile of damning money.

“Got it. Go,” Tim said.

Taking barely a second to nod at each other, Dick and Jason burst into the open, earning ten guns aimed at them in half as many seconds. Unfortunately, the imminent threat of getting shot wasn’t enough of a deterrent for them. They kept running, Dick going through a ridiculous quantity of showy acrobatic moves, Jason dodging and weaving to avoid the bullets.

He barreled straight into one of the biggest guys, toppling him as he shot two more in the knees. Dick knocked one guy out with a kick to his head and incapacitated a few more by hitting them in the gut with his escrima sticks.

The man who’d been holding the money made an attempt to run for it. Snapping the briefcase shut, he dashed for the gap between two shipping containers.

“Aww, where are you going?” Dick called with mock sadness. “We were having so much fun!” He threw an escrima stick, and it knocked the guy hard enough on the back of the head that he fell, giving Jason ample time to run over and knock him out. Pivoting back, he shot another goon in the shoulder and delivered a swift punch to her throat. She fell down just as Dick shouted.

“Hood!”

“Hood!” Tim said at the same time. “They’re gonna kill Aegis!”

Green instantly rose to Jason’s vision. How many people had to try to hurt his brother before they learned their lesson? Looking frantically around the space, he found Dick with a gun to his head, held there by

a man nearly a head taller. The man had an arm around Dick's neck, holding him in place even as Dick struggled against it.

The man leered at Jason. "Drop your weapons and hand over the money."

"Counter offer," Jason said, "drop *your* weapons and let him go."

"Not a chance." The man tightened his grip on Dick, but he'd left his neck and head exposed. His groin was also there and Jason toyed with the idea of making him *really* regret going after his brother. But the Pit was hungry, and Jason wasn't one to keep it waiting.

"Specter, look away," he said.

Tim didn't have to ask what he was talking about. "I'm not looking," came his reply a second later.

Jason cocked his head at Dick, hoping he understood what he was about to do. For half a second, his brother stiffened. Then he gave the smallest of nods.

Jason's gun went off, and blood spurted from the man's neck. He fell back, taking Dick down with him. The second he was on the ground, Dick flipped back to his feet, picking up the gun to remove the magazine before tossing it on the ground.

"You want this?" He waved the magazine at Jason.

"Nah, they're not the right kind. We can take them with us, though. No reason to let these guys keep it."

Dick grinned. "That's fair."

Without a sound, a black shape descended behind Dick. Batman shoved him away with enough force that Dick fell, going into a roll and returning to stand a few yards away. Batman ignored him, focusing on the man still bleeding from his neck.

Jason stepped forwards angrily, but Dick stopped him with a hand. "What was that for?" he yelled instead. "You didn't need to shove him!"

"Shut up!" Batman snapped, and miraculously, the two of them obeyed. He wasn't happy about it, but Jason watched as Batman did his best to bandage the man. A few moments ago, he had been

twitching violently. Now, he was moving less and less, until he finally stilled.

“Hood? Aegis? Why’s Batman there?” Tim asked, voice tinged with worry.

“No idea,” Dick muttered. A metallic taste filled Jason’s mouth. Did Batman know they had Tim running comms? Did he know where Tim was? What if he tried to take him?

No. No, Jason and Dick wouldn’t let that happen. Besides, Batman had only spoken to Dick. If he knew Tim was involved, he would have paid him a visit by now.

Batman stayed crouching beside the man’s corpse for a few more moments before he pushed himself to his feet, glowering at Jason and Dick.

“I’ve given you more than enough chances,” he said, directing his words at Jason and ignoring Dick. “You didn’t have to kill him, but you did.”

“He would have killed Aegis,” Jason spat. The Pit was still hungry. He fought it down, even as it whispered to him. “What was I supposed to do?”

“There were other places to shoot that would have incapacitated him.”

“Yeah, and then the moment he healed up, he would’ve been right back out there killing even more people!” Jason scowled, hand tightening on his gun’s handle. This was different than the times he’d run into Batman before. Usually, he tried to pull Jason towards his side, convince him to put down his guns. Now, Batman was cold, watching him. Even with his eyes covered by the cowl, Jason knew that look. It was an opponent sizing up his adversary.

“The police would have taken care of him.”

Jason and Dick both snorted at that one. “You can’t be serious, right?” Dick said incredulously. “You do know how screwed Gotham’s justice system is, right?”

Batman turned his attention to Dick. “It might be flawed, but it’s a better way to do things than *murder* .” There it was. There was the softer tone, the imploring undercurrent of persuasion. Apparently, Jason was a lost cause. The thought made him want to laugh. A new

person showed up who might be easier to convince, and Batman was already scrambling to save his soul. It made you wonder about his motives.

“I don’t know, I’m pretty glad that the guy who held a fucking *gun to my head* isn’t alive to do it anymore,” Dick said. Swearing in front of Tim? He must have been more rattled than Jason thought.

For a few moments, Batman stood silent, almost like he’d expected Dick to agree with him. Then he grunted and turned back to Jason.

“Like I said, I’ve given you more than enough chances. This is my final warning. Don’t kill again.” Danger crept into Batman’s voice, turning it to steel. When he did this, criminals cowered and villains ran. Faced with it now, Jason scoffed.

“Is that really all you’re gonna say? ‘Don’t kill again’. Or what? You’ll kill *me* ?” Fat fucking chance. Batman didn’t realize that his scare tactics only worked until people realized there was nothing to be scared of. He wouldn’t kill anyone. He wouldn’t hurt them beyond healing. Any threat he made was either a bluff reinforced with a scary voice, or harmless. Jason had been trained by people who meant every word they said and spoke violence fluently. He had looked death in the eyes and walked with it. He knew what it was to be afraid. Batman?

He was no more frightening than a children’s story.

“Hood, don’t provoke him,” Tim said. He sounded nervous.

“It’s going to be fine, Spec,” Jason replied. Batman’s head cocked, and *shit* . So he hadn’t known about Tim.

“Who are you talking to?” Batman asked.

“Your mom.” Dick let out a laugh that sounded like it had been punched out of him. Batman frowned. Wait, did he have a mom? Probably not. Jason didn’t think people with parents would grow up to fight crime dressed as a bat. People with parents usually grew up to get jobs or something. Or, Jason assumed they did. He couldn’t really talk, seeing as both of his parents were dead too.

Hm, maybe Tim knew.

“If you won’t tell me, I’ll find out through other means.” Oh, this motherfucker did not just threaten Tim. Jason raised his gun, leveling

it at Batman's lower face—the only part of him not covered in armor.

"You stay the fuck away from us," he snarled. "What we do has nothing to do with you. Stay out of it."

"If you stop killing, I won't have to get involved."

"Bullshit." Adults always said that. *We won't call CPS if you just tell us where your dad is. If you pass me the bottle, Jay, I'll throw it out. If you grab me another beer I'll let you go to your room.* "You'll get involved either way, and I'm not gonna promise a lie."

"Then I'll have to arrest you two and find your partner another way."

"Hood," Dick said in warning. He glared at Batman as he shifted into a fighting stance. Neither of them were getting captured tonight.

"Specter?" Jason asked.

"Use a flash grenade," Tim replied instantly. His voice had gone robotic in the way it always did when he was talking Jason and Dick through a tough spot on patrol. "Split up,go out through the containers and lose him in the sewers."

Jason and Dick exchanged a glance—as much of a glance as they could given their masks, anyway.

"You know, most people show up to kidnap people in vans," Dick said, drawing Batman's attention back to him. "Have you ever considered one of those? It'd work better than the whole fur-suit thing you've got going on."

Jason's hand closed around the grenade. He pulled it out and removed the pin, making eye contact with Dick before dropping it at Batman's feet. "See you later, motherfucker!" he yelled, then he and Dick took off running in opposite directions.

Jason ducked and turned through the maze of shipping containers, going for direct speed over losing Batman in the labyrinth. He could only chase one of them, and the light thuds he heard overhead told him that Dick was traveling on top. It would lend him more speed at the cost of cover.

As soon as he was near the main road, Jason ran for a sewer access port. He hauled it open and climbed onto the ladder, stopping just long enough to drag the cover back over the hole before letting

himself drop the rest of the way to the ground.

“Aegis, where are you?” he asked as he began to run, taking turns at random and trusting Tim to keep his location.

“Still above ground,” Dick replied. “Don’t see Batman anywhere, though. Can you, Specter?”

“No. Hurry and get in the sewers, hopefully we lost him.”

The stench of the water flowing past Jason turned the air thick as he slowed to a walk. Tim began giving him directions to find Dick, tracking their comms as they moved underground. When they found each other, Dick clapped Jason on the shoulder, checking him over for injuries while Jason did the same.

“I saw Batman on security cameras a few miles away,” Tim said. “You guys should be safe to get out.”

“Okay,” Dick said. “Should we stay on patrol or come home.”

Tim was quiet for a few seconds. Then: “Can you come home?” His voice was small and timid. “I…I don’t want him to find me.”

“Of course, Spec,” Jason said. He and Dick were at another access point, and he led the way out into a deserted alley near the edge of the city. “We’ll tighten security first thing tomorrow, too. You’ll be safe. I promise.”

If Batman wanted to try taking either of his brothers, he’d get to see just how loud the Pit could be when Jason didn’t try to hold it back.

Chapter 23: Lonely Bird, No Jason We are NOT Staying in the Fucking Warehouse

Chapter Notes

> I've given up on making the chapter names pretty. They're gonna reflect all the brainrot I have writing these, and I will be happy.
>
> No CW's for this chapter
>
> Enjoy! :)

Tim was waiting when they got back to the warehouse. Despite his fear in their earlier conversation, his face had smoothed back into hollow indifference. Dick went straight over and pulled him into a one armed hug anyway, both of them facing Jason so they could talk.

“Well,” Jason started, removing his helmet, “That was a shit show.”

He wasn’t wrong. Dick still gave him a sharp glance to say *I said no fucking swearing in front of Tim* , but that was as far as it went. They had bigger problems to deal with right now, starting with Tim.

“Baby bird, are you okay?” he asked.

Tim blinked up at him in confusion. “Yeah, I’m fine.” For someone who was fine, he was clinging awfully tight to Dick’s side(not that Dick was complaining. Tim was seeking physical affection; if the situation weren’t so dire, he’d be doing a fucking happy dance).

“I mean, you *were* just threatened by fucking Batman,” Jason said. Putting his helmet down on the workbench, he led the other two to take seats at the table, where Dick dragged his chair over to be next to Tim. “If that had happened to me when I was thirteen, I’d have shit myself.”

“Well, I’m not you. I know how to handle myself now.” It was true. Over the past months, Tim had become incredibly skilled with his bo staff. He’d practiced every move over and over, making corrections too minute for Dick to see, until he had them all down perfectly. It was mesmerizing to watch.

“Fair, but consider: Batman’s a dick—sorry, Dick—and he thinks he’s in charge of everyone in this city.” Jason’s voice hardened as he said

that last part, anger sparking in his eyes like flint striking steel.

“Okay?” Raising a brow, Tim relaxed further into Dick’s side, leaning his head on his shoulder. In this position, he looked almost like a normal teenager getting ready to play video games.

“Okay,” Dick teased. “ *And* , Jason’s point is that Batman’s an adult, and you’re a kid, and adults have way too much power over kids to begin with, so it’s completely understandable that you’d be shaken up by him trying to find you.”

A tiny smirk tugged at Tim’s lips. “I think I could find him first.”

“If you want to try, go ahead,” Jason said. “But first, we’ve got to tighten security.”

“Forget that, we’re moving,” Dick replied. How could they know for sure they’d lost Batman? What if he’d followed them back to the warehouse? And even if he hadn’t, the thought of Tim sitting by himself at the computer, shadows stretching all around him…it felt a little too much like a nightmare for Dick to be comfortable with.

Jason watched him for a few seconds, like he wasn’t sure whether to argue or not. In the end, he apparently decided against it, just nodding. “I’ve got several other places,” he said. “We can take our pick.”

“What about the penthouse?” Tim said immediately. He sounded interested, invested. He sounded like he cared.

Jason leaned back in his chair with a joking smirk. “Damn, Timmy. The rich lifestyle’s really got its hooks in you, huh?”

Tim flushed bright red. “It’s not about that. I just liked it when I saw it.”

When they were looking for Jason. Dick had hated every minute of that night, from the silent walk through frozen streets, to the pain that swallowed any relief he felt at seeing his brother safe. He’d been so scared that Jason was gone again. They’d already gotten a second chance. There was no way life would’ve given them a third.

“Don’t worry, baby bird. We can go there.”

Dick smiled to himself. As much as Jason might tease Tim, there was no way he’d deny him anything that made him even a little animated.

Right now, Tim looked focused and awkward. It made Dick want to do a backflip(he expressed excitement with acrobatics, okay?).

Tim smiled gently, too. “We’ll need to bring all the computers with us. If we just leave it here and Batman finds this place, he could use it to track us.”

“Agreed,” Jason said. “We should clean anything out of here that’s personal, too. The less clues we leave, the harder it’ll be for them to catch on.”

Jason and Tim had switched into strategy mode so fast it left Dick with whiplash. He was just as good at strategizing as his brothers, but the surprise of seeing them, weaving a plan of action between them, threw him off.

The fact that they were thirteen and sixteen seemed to hit harder than it usually did, watching Tim tick things off on his fingers while Jason drew imaginary diagrams on the table with his finger. They were so much more mature than any kid their ages should have to be. Without thinking, Dick held Tim a little bit closer.

They made a list of what they needed to take with them. While Dick and Tim dismantled the computers and packed them up, Jason drove into Gotham. He returned with a small U-Haul attached to the back of his bike. They didn’t have a mass amount of stuff, but with the supplies and computers, it would take them at least two trips.

When the first load was ready, all three brothers rode to the penthouse together, Tim on the back of Jason’s bike like usual. Sometimes Dick pretended to be upset that his sidecar wasn’t getting any use other than carrying groceries, but he didn’t really mind. It made Tim happy to ride semi-precariously behind Jason(and honestly, Dick had lost the right to call that ‘too dangerous’ when he decided to go out fighting literal murderers each night).

They hauled the boxes up through the elevator and into the penthouse. Thank fuck for the elevator opening directly into the living room. Between the three of them, it only took around twenty minutes before they could go back and get the second load.

This one contained all the weapons, which was significantly more stressful to get through the lobby and up the elevator, but they managed via poker faces with varied effectiveness.

When everything was inside, Jason collapsed on a couch. The entire place was sparsely furnished like the warehouse had been before Dick and Tim moved in. While he closed his eyes, Dick wandered around.

After a few minutes, he found Tim looking at a shelf, staring at its contents. Curious, Dick went over to see what it was.

The stones Tim had put on Jason's grave were front and center, proudly displayed and surrounded by other objects. It didn't take much thought for Dick to realize that these must have been gifts Tim left at Jason's grave.

"You kept all this stuff?" he asked.

Jason cracked one eye open to see what they were looking at, then sat up and came over. "'Course I did. What, you think I was just gonna let my little brother's gifts go unreceived?"

Because he was right behind him, Jason couldn't see, but Dick caught a glimpse of the proud glow on Tim's face. Reaching over, Dick ruffled his hair.

"These are all really cool, baby bird. Did I ever tell you how cool those stones are?"

"Uh, no. No, you didn't." Tim's brow furrowed as he continued looking at the display.

"Well, they are. I really like 'em."

"Do you remember where you found them?" Jason asked.

Tim tilted his head in thought. "There's a river a few miles away from Drake Manor," he said. A vision came to Dick's mind of the woodlands starting a few hundred yards away from the mansion's massive lawn. "I like going there sometimes."

"That's really cool. Maybe we could go together sometime, if you want." Dick reached over and slung an arm around Jason's shoulders, pulling him close. He got the message and tugged Tim in between them so that the three of them were leaning on each other, looking at all the gifts Tim had left in the cemetery. How long ago had he left the first one?

"We could do that," Tim said after a few moments of silence. Dick had almost forgotten about the offer he'd initially made. The comforting

warmth of his brothers and the penthouse's safety, combined with the exertion of lugging all the boxes around, had made him drowsy. A nap sounded amazing.

Jason seemed to think the same thing. "We'll definitely do that, baby bird," he said. "For now, though, I'm exhausted. Can we sleep now?"

There was only Jason's bed upstairs, and Dick and Tim didn't feel like unpacking their mattresses. The three of them ended up unloading all their combined blanket and pillows onto the floor, creating a nest where they lay down, Tim sandwiched between Jason and Dick. Tim had his head resting on Dick's arm, and Jason had tossed an arm over both of them. As snores began to fill the room, Dick smiled sleepily. His last thought before drifting off was, *I'm glad we're brothers* .

Chapter 24: Little Bird, Hey What the Fuck--

Chapter Notes

HMMMMMMMMMM was the brief time of 50% angst nice? It's over now. Song for this chapter...Walls Could Talk by Halsey. I'm not sure it fits g r e a t, but it's fun to picture the fight scene to.

Content Warnings for this chapter: violence, mentioned child abuse

Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things were not adding up. Or, rather, Tim supposed things *were* adding up, and their conclusion was just a little too impossible for Tim to believe.

When he'd told Jason that he thought he could find Batman first, Tim hadn't entirely been lying. He'd been thinking for a while about how Batman acted differently around his brothers. Things had begun to connect in a way that left Tim wondering.

Though he hadn't interacted with them much, Batman's approach towards Dick and Jason had been noticeably different from his usual method of action. For one, he talked to them. There had been times when other vigilantes appeared in Gotham. When he encountered them on a case, Batman had simply taken them down alongside the bad guys and left them for the police.

A bit hypocritical, if you asked Tim.

Batman had never been one to hold long conversations with his opponents. And yet, in the two times he'd interacted with Dick and Jason, that was all they had done. Talk. What made it more confusing was knowing that Jason, at least, blatantly killed people. The Bat letting something so profoundly against his own moral code slide without a fight was unheard of. Of course, that grace period was coming to an end, but still.

It was fucking weird. Tim had followed Batman for years, and he'd never seen him do anything like this. Add it to the fact that he obviously knew who Dick was, and you had a *really* weird situation.

Currently, Tim was by himself in the coffee shop where he'd met up with Dick several months ago. Jason and Dick hadn't been excited to let him go with the whole *Batman hunting them down* thing, but Tim had convinced them by saying it was broad daylight and then refusing to take no for an answer.

Since it was midday, the coffee shop was nearly entirely empty. The swooning barista was replaced by a friendly girl with short black hair who'd given him his four shots of espresso with only minor concern.

Sitting at a table in the back corner so no one could come up behind him, Tim mentally spread out his ideas on the table. He didn't have physical evidence, but he had past events and his own theories, and, well…not to brag, but Tim's theories tended to be right.

Exhibit A: the warehouse where Tim had first seen Batman confront Jason as Hood. It had been strange when he didn't attack then, and it was still strange now. On top of that, Batman had offered to *train* Jason. That was an unprecedented move.

He'd sounded so…tentative, too. Batman didn't do tentative. It didn't fit with his whole 'I am the night, fear the shadows for they are me' deal he had going on.

Possible reasons? Batman didn't want to hurt a kid. Unreasonable. Tim dismissed that one almost immediately. There had been teenagers that tried to make a name for themselves as vigilantes before, and while Batman had never done more than was necessary to knock them out, he'd never had a problem doing it. Add that this specific child was a known murderer, and the theory collapsed.

Alternate possibility: Batman had a personal connection to Jason. Supporting evidence: he didn't want to fight him, and he tried to talk him away from killing. Exhibit B.

Exhibit B: that time Batman stalked Dick and followed him onto a rooftop.

Creepy.

Either way, the glaringly concerning part of that whole business was that Batman knew who Dick was, and he'd known that he was training to become Aegis, which also meant Dick's cover was basically useless. To find that out, Batman would have had to either be watching the warehouse, or following Jason when he talked to Dick on comms. Going deeper, the only way he'd be able to connect Dick to the Red

Hood would be for him to have seen Dick saving Jason from those dealers a few months ago.

If Batman had been watching the warehouse, he would've known who Tim was. With that theory out, Batman had to be following Hood.

Again, Tim thought. *Creepy* .

Knowing Dick was connected to Hood would require Batman to search Dick's life for people he was in regular contact with. Tim knew for a fact that Dick didn't have a lot of friends because of his plethora of trust issues. Maybe he should try and get him to join a gym or something, one with gymnastics equipment. It would keep him from going up on the roofs every time he wanted a run.

Anyway—the only people Dick was regularly in contact with, at least now, were Tim and Jason. Tim and Dick didn't have much of an online footprint—they preferred to talk in person, and most of their quality time was in the warehouse. Tim had never liked going out to public places, and his brothers didn't push him to.

Jason, however? The two of them were always messaging and calling to coordinate some plan or other. Whether it was to stop a robbery or decide who needed to get milk, they were working together. Tim helped, of course, but he was Specter—when they talked about crime, he was in their ears and untraceable online. Not even Batman could find him.

Encrypted phones might be a good idea . Tim got out a Sharpie and shoved up the sleeve of his Flying Graysons hoodie to write the idea on his arm.

Since losing his jacket, he'd been wearing the hoodie outside. It was nowhere near as good as the jacket, but it was sort of something, which was better than nothing.

So Batman knew Jason and Dick were connected. He was connected to Jason. On the roof with Dick, he'd acted just as unsure of himself as when he'd spoken to Hood.

Conclusion: Batman knew both of them, and felt connected to both of them. To do that, he would've had to know them before Jason's death. And even then, Jason and Dick's lives had been mostly separated. The only person who knew them both was…

Tim shoved the thoughts out of his mind. He pictured the evidence

scattering, knocking sharply on his head to force any conclusions he might make away.

“Get out, get out, get out.”

Was it possible? Well, it wasn’t impossible. But—Tim stood and strode for the entrance, barely acknowledging the barista’s wave as he pushed through the door—even if it was real, he refused to come to that conclusion alone in a coffee shop without either of his brothers there to tell him if he was insane.

Tim threw his empty cup into a trash can on the street corner, then wove through a traffic jam to cross. Stuck in his thoughts, he forgot to pay attention to the one thing Dick always bitched about when walking around Gotham—the alleyways.

A small hand closed around Tim’s wrist in a vice and yanked him into a small space between buildings. They had so much momentum that when they let go, Tim stumbled several feet away, barely keeping his footing. His attacker was now between him and the street.

Once he’d regained his balance, Tim got a look at the person who had grabbed him, and…oh.

Oh my god. Tim’s attacker was a literal fucking child, short, wiry, with a head of deep brown hair and wearing a suit that looked like it was inspired by a traffic light. He had an armored red tunic that went halfway down his thighs. Green gloves covered his hands, and a green domino obscured his face. He wore a black cape and leggings, but the inside of the cape was a yellow that matched the utility belt on his waist.

If Tim wasn’t a thirteen year old vigilante with two teenage brothers who were also vigilantes, he might have laughed.

As it was, the kid unsheathed a fucking katana and ran at him without saying a word, so Tim decided laughing wasn’t the best option at the moment.

He dodged the first swing and searched the surrounding area for a weapon. The best option would have been a makeshift bo, but he saw a glass bottle near the wall and grabbed it. He knew those could do damage.

(In his mind’s eye, he saw Alfred stitching up a gash on Jason’s shoulder, and his stomach turned. A bo would have been so much

better.)

The boy turned with terrifying precision and brought his blade back around towards Tim's neck. Tim ducked and swung his bottle at the kid's head. The sight of Jason bleeding flashed through his head again and guilt seized his chest, but the boy dodged easily.

Tim wouldn't say they were evenly matched. There was something in the way the boy fought. The intent with which he moved, the fluidity connecting every strike—it reminded him of Jason.

The League , Tim considered, but that couldn't be right. Most of the world had no idea the League existed, and they certainly wouldn't have achieved that with a fucking stoplight uniform. Maybe he was trained by them, but this boy wasn't an operative of theirs. There was something else happening.

The kid was better at fighting, but Tim was better at dodging. He'd spent his life avoiding people, from his parents to Batman. Now he was avoiding one specific person, just more aggressively. Easy.

Not easy, actually. A swing from the kid's katana cut Tim's leg open. Stinging pain tore through him, and—wait, fuck. He had a panic button. Tim had *made* the panic button. God, he was stupid.

Granted, he was also not expecting to be dragged into an alley by a murderous child, but still. Spinning away from the next blow—thank you for the gymnastics coaching, Dick—Tim shoved up his sleeve and pressed the side button on his watch twice.

Hopefully, the signal went out. Tim didn't have time to wait, though, because the moment he returned his focus to the fight again, he found the kid mid-swing towards his face. Yelping, he ducked and rolled away, kicking one leg out to knock the kid's feet out from under him.

It worked for half a second. The boy went down, but leapt back to his feet before Tim could even start to run back for the street.

He launched himself at Tim. Grabbing his shoulders, he knocked him to the ground. Tim's head cracked against the concrete. Pain exploded through his skull as stars appeared in his vision. Blinking them away, he only noticed the kid's sword when it was pressed against his neck.

A smug smirk appeared on the boy's face. This close, Tim could see freckles against the brown skin of his cheeks. They only added to the surrealism that was the boy's age next to his skill.

“I don’t see why he ever liked you,” the boy said. His voice was unmistakably juvenile. If Tim had to guess, he’d say that the boy couldn’t be older than ten. “Your incompetence is matched only by your stupidity.”

Okay, an eloquent ten year old. Tim held very still, forcing back the urge to struggle. His thoughts were growing sluggish as a fog filled his brain, but he held onto lucidity with both hands. If he did the wrong thing, this kid would kill him. He had to stall long enough for Dick or Jason to get there.

When he’d fallen, the bottle had rolled a few inches from his hand. Glancing over, Tim saw it, neck facing him. If he just reached a little…

The sword dug harder into his neck. Right. Got it. Distraction first, weapon second. Okay.

“Who’s he?” Tim asked. It was all he could think of through the fog, but it worked. The kid drew himself up proudly, chin lifting and smirk growing. There was a yellow **R** emblazoned on the right breast of his tunic.

“Batman, of course.” The kid spoke like he’d gotten to the highest point on the playground and declared himself the king of recess. “I’m his son, his true successor.”

“You’re Batman’s son.” Tim must have sounded too incredulous, because the boy’s smile dropped. Scowling, he pressed the sword further into Tim’s throat, hard enough for his breath to turn raspy. He felt the skin beneath it pinch and break, blood welling to the surface.

“You doubt me?”

If he didn’t say the right thing, he was fucked. *Think, think, think* .

The kid’s dad was Batman. He was proud of it. He was also willing to fight someone to the death for some issue that only he seemed aware of. Clearly, he felt superior to Tim. There was something he knew that he thought Tim didn’t, and he was enjoying holding it over Tim’s head like stolen lunch money. If Tim could guess right, he could throw the boy off guard.

There was only one thing Tim might know that could possibly be right. He dragged in a breath and took a shot in the dark.

“I don’t doubt you. I just didn’t think Bruce Wayne had any children.”

The kid stiffened, and Tim took his chance. His hand shot out and grabbed the bottle, still miraculously undamaged. With only half a second’s guilt-ridden hesitation, he smashed it against the boy’s head.

The kid fell to the side, blood trickling from the wound Tim had made. Tim knocked the katana away from his neck and rolled away, leg screaming. When he righted himself, Tim was alone in the alley.

He had to get back to the penthouse to tell Dick and Jason. Not just about Bruce—and Tim was still reeling, his mind chanting *you were right, you were right, you were right* —, but about his *son* ? And apparently *sidekick* ?

Also, what the *fuck,* sidekick? Tim knew he was a vigilante, but at least he wasn’t out there actually *fighting* people. And sure, he wanted to be, but Jason and Dick hadn’t let him, because that’s how it *worked* ! Kids might want to fight crime, but even Tim could admit that actually *letting* them was a terrible fucking idea.

Jason was a special case, in a way that he should never have even been. He didn’t deserve to have gone through everything he did, but he had, and he was back, and when a kid comes back from the literal fucking dead and wants to help his city, you don’t exactly get to tell him no.

The penthouse was a few miles’ walk away. Tim went to push himself to his feet, but dropped back to the ground with a yelp when pain surged in his leg, leaving him gasping. Blood had soaked through the fabric of his jeans.

Was there supposed to be that much? How much could he lose before he passed out? How much before he died?

Just before he really started to panic, Tim remembered the panic button. Dick and Jason knew where he was, and that he was in danger. They’d come for him. He just had to wait.

Gritting his teeth against the pain in his leg, Tim dragged himself to lean against the wall behind a dumpster. Letting his head fall back against the bricks sent a sent a starburst of pain through his skull, reminding him that he had more to worry about than just the one injury. He also still had blood trickling down his neck. That wouldn’t be pretty.

Closing his eyes, Tim did his best to relax. He couldn’t do anything until Dick or Jason got there. He just hoped it would be soon.

Chapter End Notes

I SAID NO ROBINS AU BUT I GUESS I LIED. In my defense though when I made that tag I hadn't thought this far. I also had kind of just thought Bruce would just pull off his cowl at some emotionally charged moment and go 'kids it's me, your dad'. But then I thought more and realized Bruce is way too cagey with information to do that, and Tim is way too smart to not go 'hold up'.

So yeah, Tim just procrastinated a life shattering realization until he felt like doing it only to un-procrastinate when he needed it to cause havoc. Yeah :)

Chapter 25: Lost Bird, Oh God No

Chapter Notes

Ha. Ha ha. Hahaha sorry.

Content Warnings for this chapter: blood, injury, trauma, flashbacks, dissociation

Enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason had been at the penthouse by himself when Tim's panic button went off. He'd been setting up the security system he and Tim had worked together on when the monitors lit up and played the alarm. Jason almost fell off his ladder.

Cold dread replaced the blood in his veins as he dashed to the monitor, already reaching for his helmet and guns. Furiously securing his holsters to his thighs—no time for armor, logic be damned—, Jason searched the map on the monitor for Tim's distress beacon.

He knew they should never have let him go by himself to the coffee shop. With Batman looking for them, it was so clearly unsafe. But if it had been him in Tim's position, hunted by a vigilante who had yet to be beaten…Jason's go to move would have been running. Tim would need space, he had thought, so they could at least make sure they knew where he was when he was getting it.

Fuck that strategy, clearly.

Tim's beacon was coming from a few streets away from the coffee shop. Jason quickly sent the directions to the overlay on his contact lens before putting it away. He changed into a plain black shirt—the other one had a logo—and yanked on his jacket.

Dick was at the grocery store. There was no time to tell him. Helmet under his arm, Jason went straight out the window and down the fire escape to where his and Dick's motorcycles were parked in the alley. They'd locked them up carefully to stop them from being stolen.

Jason shoved his helmet on and released the lock on his bike with a thumbprint ID. Jumping on, he roared out into the street, following the map on his lens to Tim's location.

He reached the alley in under twenty minutes(could his little brother have picked a spot *any* further from the safehouse?). Dismounting the bike in the road, Jason charged into the darkness.

He saw the blood before he saw Tim.

It was smeared along the concrete in huge lines, smaller drops further away, and a big pool near the back of the alley. Jason's stomach turned. There was so much. Was all of it Tim's? There was no way.

That thought was disproven the moment he found his baby brother.

Tim was leaning against the wall behind the dumpster, eyes closed. Blood trickled from the back of his head and a cut on his neck while a pool formed beneath his leg. The bottom of his pants leg was soaked. Jason swallowed back a gag.

He had a first aid kit in his bike's small storage compartment. Retrieving it quickly, Jason dropped to his knees at Tim's side.

"Timmy," he said softly, even as panic threatened to overwhelm his brain. "Baby bird, can you hear me? Can you wake up?"

No answer. Tim's face was so pale. How much blood had he lost? What if he needed a transfusion? They didn't know his blood type, or how to perform one. If they took him to a hospital, they'd call his parents.

"Baby bird, please," he croaked. Tears burned his eyes. He shouldn't be reacting like this. He should be calm. He'd seen people hurt worse than this and he'd helped them without breaking a sweat. The procedures were right there in his head. He just had to…

He just had to…

But Tim looked so dead . *He was bloodied, and bruises were blossoming on his arms and there was a bit of glass in his hand, and oh god he looked like he'd been* beaten *before he was stabbed and what if—*

But it couldn't be Him. Tears began to fall, fast and thick down Jason's cheeks. It couldn't be Him. He was in Arkham, and he hadn't broken out. It would have been on the news if he broke out.

Come on, sport, give us a smile .

He could hear that goddamn *laugh* again, echoing around him. But it wasn't him this time. This time, it was Tim, and he was gone and Jason was too late and he hadn't saved him and it was *all his fault* —

He hadn't even realized that he'd gotten his phone out until Dick picked up.

"Hey, Jaybird, what's up?" His brother's voice was chipper, standing out against a background of voices and movement that must be the store. "If you're calling to ask about hot chocolate, I got it with marshmallows, I promise."

Jason dragged in a shaky breath. "Dick—" his voice broke into a heaving sob. Tim still wasn't moving, and Jason wasn't helping him. He was being useless. He was so fucking useless. He should have known this would happen, he should've protected Tim, but now he was here and he was dying dying *dead* —

" *Jay.* What's going on?" Dick had turned serious, all jokes forgotten. "Where are you?"

"I—" Jason hiccuped. Leaning forward, he wrapped his free arm around himself in an awkward hug. He tried to shut his eyes, but every time he did Tim was still there, except now he was in a warehouse and there was a crowbar and the blood *everywhere* " — Tim's hurt. Tim's…Dick, *help,* I don't know what to do."

I can't lose him I can't lose him I can't lose him please please please .

"Where?" Dick asked. The sounds around him had changed to the rumble of engines and the crowded pandemonium of pedestrians. "Jaybird, I promise it's going to be okay—" *it wasn't okay it wasn't Tim was dead and it was Jason's fault and He'd done it He murdered him and Jason should have known* "—tell me where you are."

"We're…" Jason hadn't paid attention to where he was going, only the directions. He glanced towards the map still in the corner of his vision. "The alley on Bronze Street. Six down from the coffee shop."

"I'll be there in ten minutes. I've gotta hang up, Jay, but I'll be there, I promise, okay? Just hang on."

"Okay," Jason sniffed.

The phone clicked, and Dick was gone. Jason let it drop from his hand. He was suffocating in the helmet. Yanking it off, he gasped for

air, even as he shook with sobs.

He had to do something. He had to *help Tim* . But all he could make himself do was scoot closer, grabbing Tim's uninjured hand to check his wrist for a pulse. It was there. Another sob clawed out of his throat, and Jason pitched forward again, nearly folding himself in half as he kept his hand on Tim's pulse, feeling the weak rhythm.

"Tim, wake up," he begged. "I need you to wake up. We both need you. Come on, baby bird, please. We can't do it without you."

Nothing. Jason leaned his forehead against Tim's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Dick appeared in half the time he said. Jason heard his footsteps before they stopped, and his brother let out a choked, "Oh god."

"I don't know what to do," Jason said, looking up at his brother through teary eyes. "I…"

Dick squeezed his eyes shut, forcing back the tears Jason saw welling up. "Does he have a pulse?" Jason nodded. "Okay. Then… *fuck* , I'm not good at this." He was right. Jason had been the one teaching *Dick* first aid, and now here he was, sitting uselessly and expecting him to handle everything. "Recovery position. Recovery position, right?" Dick asked, looking frantically at Jason.

Recovery position for a head injury. Right. That was what he was supposed to do. Jason nodded slowly.

"Okay. You put him in recovery position, I'll get bandages and…oh god, he's gonna need a tourniquet, isn't he?"

"Pressure first," Jason said without thinking as he moved to put Tim into recovery position with his head facing Jason.

Dick looked over at him, panic shining in his eyes. "Pressure. I can do that. Okay. Pressure, get the glass out of his hand, take him back to the penthouse and look at his head. Right? We can do that?"

Was that right? Jason was forgetting. It was getting harder and harder to think clearly, his mind shutting down the more he looked at Tim. Injured Tim. Unconscious Tim. Dead Tim.

Dead Little Batsy, blown sky-high! You'll be famous, kiddo! Not that you'll live to see it, of course.

"Jaybird." Dick waved his hand in front of Jason's face until he looked over at him, blinking sluggishly. "Jay, I've done what I can." Had he? It had only been a few seconds, hadn't it? But when Jason glanced down, Tim's hand and leg were thickly bandaged, and the blood on his head had been cleaned away. "We need to get him back to the safehouse. I'll take him in the sidecar, but I need you to drive yourself back. Are you safe to do that?" He searched Jason's eyes for something that he apparently didn't find. "Okay. I can come back and get you. I'll just have to get Tim back first, and we'll come back for your bike another—"

"I can drive," Jason interrupted him. He didn't sound convincing. He didn't sound like anything, really. His voice was empty and hollow. It sounded like Tim's had, before he started to seem more alive again. "I'll drive."

"Are you sure?" Dick asked slowly. Jason nodded. "Okay. Follow me, then."

Dick lifted Tim up bridal style, cradling his tiny frame against his chest as he carried him out to the bikes. Jason followed robotically.

Luckily, the street was mostly empty. This part of Gotham was full of office buildings, so the streets were quiet in the last half hour before the workday ended. Dick gently set Tim down in the sidecar with his head resting against the seat. While he buckled him in, Jason mounted his own bike and started the engine.

They rode back silently, Jason watching Tim's limp form in the sidecar almost more than he watched the road. When they got back to their building, they drove into the parking garage rather than the alley, so they could use the elevator to get Tim up to the penthouse without anybody seeing. Dick carried him upstairs and laid him down on the mattress in his room.

His leg had stopped bleeding sometime on the ride home. His hand had never been a major worry, but his head certainly was. The blood had already clotted when Jason found him, but there was a massive lump where the skin had broken. Until he woke up, they wouldn't be able to check for a concussion without a hospital, but Jason was almost certain Tim had one.

When they'd done everything they could, Jason found himself on the

ground next to Tim's bed. They didn't have any chairs in the room, but he'd sooner die than leave Tim alone.

The door opened, and Dick returned from where he'd been washing his hands. Jason should probably do that. His hands were covered in blood, but he couldn't bring himself to get up. He'd shut down completely; there was nothing he could do now but wait for emotions to return.

Dick sat down next to Jason and pressed a mug into his hands. Hot chocolate with marshmallows.

"He'll be okay, Jaybird," Dick murmured. "I promise."

Instead of replying, Jason put his head on Dick's shoulder and curled around to lean against him. Dick put his arm around Jason's shoulders and squeezed, holding him close. Jason closed his eyes, memorizing his brother's warmth and the fact that he was here and alive and okay.

They were okay.

Eventually, Jason became aware of how controlled Dick's breathing was, drawing in forced breaths with careful exhales meant to be quiet.

"You can cry, Robin," he said quietly. "He's your brother, too."

"I'm fine," Dick said tightly.

"That's bullshit. Just cry. You're not fooling anyone."

Dick said nothing, but a few moments later, a tear dripped onto his cheek. Putting his hot chocolate down, he turned so his face was pressed further into Dick's shoulder and wrapped his arms tightly around him. Dick returned the hug just as forcefully, resting his chin on top of Jason's hair.

"You did a good job, Dick," Jason mumbled against his brother's shoulder. "You did exactly what you had to."

Dick drew in a shuddering breath. "Thanks, Little Wing."

"'Course."

More tears fell into Jason's hair, but he didn't pull away, and neither did Dick. They stayed in the hug as Dick began to shake with

suppressed sobs, pressing a kiss against Jason’s hair. Jason knew the feeling. He wanted to remind himself that Dick and Tim were here, and safe, and sometimes the only way to do that was to hold on tight.

He and Dick held onto each other and waited for Tim to wake up.

Chapter End Notes

I'M SORRY I HAD TO

Chapter 26: Lonely Bird, I Swear to God if These Fuckers get Hurt One More Time--

Chapter Notes

I'd like to say that this is now officially the longest thing I've ever written, and I'm so fucking happy about that. This fic is incredible, and the comments and kudos are all amazing and give me so much serotonin. I'm so excited to see where it goes next(I have not outline, these chapters are completely improvised)!

Content Warnings for this chapter: injury

Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been twelve hours, and Tim was still unconscious.

After Dick's tears had dried up, he and Jason had dragged chairs from the kitchen into Tim's bedroom. Jason had taken up residence in his chair with the copy of *Pride and Prejudice* Tim had given him. He looked almost casual reading it, except for his left hand on Tim's wrist, constantly checking for his pulse. Dick would have done the same, if he could bear to acknowledge that he was checking to make sure it didn't stop.

It was three in the morning. Neither of them had gone on patrol. They didn't have to talk about it. Until Tim woke up, neither of them were leaving the house.

Dick had kept himself busy. There was no way in hell he or Jason would be sleeping until Tim woke up, but their bodies didn't seem to realize that. So he'd been brewing pot after pot of coffee for him and Jason.

To help occupy his brain, he'd tried increasingly strange flavorings in each pot. Jason hadn't reacted to any of them yet, not even when Dick mixed in a spoonful of salt. He silently accepted each mug without looking up, and within half an hour, it was empty.

Come to think of it, Dick couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Jason turn a page.

He couldn't decide which version of Crisis-Jason he preferred. The one he'd been after Drake Manor, desperate for anything to distract him, or this one, hollow and robotic. He'd never liked seeing Tim lifeless, and seeing Jason begin to mimic him filled Dick with a fear he wanted gone.

So, he made coffee, and checked Tim's bandages, and fought the urge to run for the rooftops, because his little brother—both of them—needed him, and he could not leave.

The cut on Tim's neck was the worst for Dick to look at. When he'd first seen his unconscious body in the alley, it had been the first thing he registered. The sticky blood in his hair and the glass shard in his hand had been nothing to that thin red smile across his baby brother's throat.

That injury had been the one that scared him. Of course, the head injury was more concerning, and Tim's leg was bleeding significantly more than his throat, but…all Dick had been able to see was the life leaving Tim through his throat, choking him as he lay alone in that alley. That image greeted Dick every time he closed his eyes.

Tears stung his eyes, and he wiped them away furiously.

"You can cry," Jason said in monotone from the other side of the bed, revealing that he had, in fact, not been reading at all.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Dick's voice cracked. *Shit* .

"Not crying isn't a requirement for taking care of people, Robin. Just because you're taking the lead doesn't mean you can't show emotions." Jason still hadn't looked up.

"How do you think Tim would feel if he woke up and saw me crying?"

The answer was guilty. Tim had spent so long with his brain twisting every little error into a reason for his inadequacy that he'd somehow blame himself for being attacked.

Oh. And they still didn't know who'd attacked him. Right.

"It doesn't matter, cause he'll see that we've both been crying. Being scared for him isn't weak, Dick."

"Scared?" Dick pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "I'm fucking terrified. We don't even know who did this to him! What if

Batman knows who he is? What if he did this?"

Jason finally put down his book, giving his full attention to Dick. "Listen, Dickibird, as much as I hate him, Batman wouldn't do this to a kid. Those injuries are from someone who wanted Tim dead." Dick bit his lip against a whimper. Why did someone want to hurt Tim? What had he ever done? What had any of them done? "Batman's a shifty piece of shit, but he'd rather let hundreds of people die than kill. Just look at the—at the Joker." The name, coming from Jason's mouth, sounded like an accusation and a question. Dick thought he knew what his brother was asking.

Why does Batman refuse to fight his enemies with as much force as they use on him?

But that wasn't important. They already knew Batman stuck to his morals to the point of obsession. What was important was finding out who'd hurt Tim.

"If not him, then who?" Dick asked.

"We'll have to wait for Tim to tell us when he wakes up." Neither one of them acknowledged the *if* .

"We'll find them, right?"

Jason's voice was hard when he answered. "Yeah. We will."

Whoever had hurt their baby brother wasn't going to get away with it. If it took everything Dick had, he would find them, and he would make them pay. The stony look on Jason's face told him he wasn't alone.

"He's still alright?" Dick asked, nodding at Tim's wrist. Jason glanced at it with an air of surprise, like he hadn't realized he was still holding it.

"Yeah. He's fine."

They lapsed back into silence, and the momentary spark of anger was extinguished in the face of all Dick's fear, roiling in his stomach and weighing on his mind. His eyes began to water again, and despite Jason's advice, Dick wiped them away.

"You know, back in the League, emotion wasn't really a big thing," Jason said. Dick glanced over to find him staring intensely at the

cover of *Pride and Prejudice* , one leg bouncing. “Especially for me. When I was just resurrected, any change in my emotional state could trigger the bloodlust, so they just taught me to suppress all of it. There was as much training for that as there was for fighting. It became muscle memory. I remember…” Jason blinked quickly, then seemed to stop himself as a tear slipped down his cheek. “I remember one night, I was unhappy.

“I *knew* I was unhappy. But nothing in me fit what I knew about unhappiness. I looked in the mirror and tried to make myself do anything to reflect how I was feeling. I tried to see it in my eyes, I tried to cry, I tried to find some motivation to *react* . But there was nothing.

“It hurt,” he said. “It was empty, but it still *hurt* .”

“I…” Dick couldn’t think of anything to say. He’d always been emotional. His feelings built and built to the point of pain, but he’d never felt it the other way around. After seeing both of his brothers hollow, he knew he never wanted to. “Jaybird, I’m so sorry.”

Jason shrugged, tilting his head slightly. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. The point is, when I got out, I had to unteach all of that shit. It was really, really hard. But I did it. The first time I cried again, I was *happy* . It’s not weak to express feelings, Dick. It’s necessary. If you try to shut down, it’ll kill you.”

“I’m sorry,” Dick said again, blinking away his tears. Then he stopped, closed his eyes, and let them fall.

“Alright, come on. Over here.” Jason put his book on the nightstand and held out his free arm. “You need a damn hug, you cuddly motherfucker.”

“I really do.” Dick crossed the room to Jason’s side and allowed himself to be pulled into an awkward hug with him still standing and Jason keeping his fingers on Tim’s pulse. The tears were falling fast, but they weren’t loud. Dick didn’t sob, or hiccup, or sniffle. He just cried, silent tears slipping down his cheeks and dripping onto Jason’s shirt.

“See, Robin? It’s fun to cry.” Jason reached up and carded his fingers through Dick’s hair. No one had done that since Dick was a kid. He’d forgotten how nice it felt.

They stayed there for a long time, Jason gently running his fingers

through Dick's hair, and Dick letting the tears fall. Eventually, he stood, when the tears had dried once more.

"I'm gonna go get us some more coffee," he said.

"Sounds good. But can you not put salt in it this time?"

Dick laughed, a bright sound that felt wildly out of place in this makeshift medbay. "Sure, Jaybird. Sugar it is."

Chapter End Notes

> Friendly reminder that Damian grew up in the League and went through this same training. Also he was used to fighting to prove his worth and status so yeah :) ✧thoughts✧

Chapter 27: Little Bird, Everything Hurts

Chapter Notes

:)

Content Warnings for this chapter: injury, self harm, ableism, bad parenting

Song: Panic Room by Au/Ra

Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim may have had a hard time connecting with people, but when he woke up, he felt a divine moment of connection with every other human being who had ever had the shit beaten out of them. To sum it up?

He wanted to go back to sleep.

Even though his eyes were closed, the light of whatever room he was in sent stabbing pains through Tim's already pounding head. Groaning, he moved to roll over so he could press his face into the pillow—and oh, he suddenly realized, he was in bed—, only to stop with an involuntary gasp of pain when his leg screamed in protest.

Immediately, the world around him came to life as several people abruptly stood. "Tim?" Jason said urgently, in a voice thin with nervous hope.

Jason. Tim forgot about the light and opened his eyes. Though he instantly regretted it, the sight of his brother in front of him, gripping *Pride and Prejudice* like a lifeline, was an instant relief. Jason's under-eye circles had grown larger and darker. His hair was messy, and an almost empty coffee cup sat on Tim's nightstand.

"Hey," he croaked—holy shit, his throat *hurt*. A stinging pain shot through his neck. Usually, when Tim had a sore throat, the problem was inside. This time, though…

Gingerly, he lifted the hand that didn't feel like it had its own pulse and touched his neck. His fingers met the stiff cotton of bandages. He'd forgotten that the kid almost slit his throat.

Dick came into Tim's field of vision from the doorway and immediately wrapped him in a hug, gently avoiding his injuries but at the same time conveying a sense of intense relief. Jason joined in with his arms around both of them, cheek resting on Tim's head.

"See?" he mumbled. "Emotional vulnerability. 'S nice."

Dick snorted and pulled away. Ice-blue eyes searched Tim's for any sign of pain. Honestly, Tim was hurting everywhere. Pain radiated from the back of his head. He could feel a thick wrapping of bandages around his leg, which hurt like someone had traced a line with a hot poker along his thigh. A similar wrapping had been applied to his hand, where Tim faintly remembered a shard of glass from the bottle he'd hit that boy with.

Guilt turned his stomach again. Tim avoided Jason's gaze.

"I'd ask if you were okay, but I think that's kind of stupid right now," Dick said.

"That's fair."

"Do you want to tell us what happened instead?"

God, what *had* happened. Tim could remember it all, but his thoughts were so fuzzy, and he'd had so many of them during that fight, and most of them were important. Trying to pin them down felt like trying to catch mist in a net.

"The um…the kid," he said finally. "The kid attacked me."

His brothers gave him nearly identical looks of confusion.

"A kid," Jason repeated dubiously.

"Yeah." Tim tried to nod, but the slightest movement sent pain screeching through his head. Screwing his eyes shut for a few moments, he willed himself to relax back onto the pillows. "He had on some sort of uniform. It was—" Tim couldn't hold back a snort "—It looked like a fucking traffic light."

"Hey, language." Tim got the feeling that Dick was only saying it to feel normal.

He shrugged it off. "I don't know why he was wearing it. But…" He looked at Jason. "The way he fought reminded me of the stuff you

learned from the League."

Jason's gaze sharpened dangerously. Crossing his arms, his eyes flicked over Tim's injuries one by one, taking stock. "What did he look like?"

"Uh…" Tim's brain was fuzzy, but he couldn't afford for it to be fuzzy right now. Using his uninjured hand, he knocked on the side of his head a few times, ignoring the nausea that swept over him.

"Tim." A gentle hand took hold of his wrist. Dick pulled his arm away gently, looking concerned but not angry. His parents had always been angry when he did that in front of him. Tim remembered Jack making a face, slack-jawed and bug-eyed, while he imitated Tim. They were mad at him for acting out to get attention. He'd just been trying to make the thoughts in his head go away. "Tim, baby bird, are you alright?"

Tim nodded silently, but when Dick went to take his hand away, he held on. In response to Dick's questioning look, he tentatively said, "Hug?"

Dick's gaze softened. "Of course, baby bird." He sat on the bed next to Tim and gently slid an arm around his shoulders, carefully maneuvering Tim's head to rest on his chest. Tim could hear his heartbeat through his shirt. The steady rhythm had a clarifying effect on his mind.

"Can I join you guys?" Jason asked casually. They'd barely nodded their consent before he was mock-dive bombing the other side of the bed, making sure not to land hard enough to jostle Tim, before crawling over to put an arm around both of them. "I told you, we're touch starved."

"Yeah, we know," Dick replied. "Baby bird, do you want to keep talking? Or do you need a while?"

"I can talk," Tim said quickly. His brothers' body heat had made him realize how cold he was. Snuggling closer to them, Tim filtered through his memories for the encounter with the boy and carefully summoned his appearance. "The kid was short. I think he was nine, maybe ten? He definitely wasn't older than me. He had brown skin, brown hair, freckles…"

"Anything else?" Jason had gone rigid, his voice tight. Tim and Dick both looked over to find him staring at the sheets, mind clearly

running fast. “What color were his eyes?”

“I couldn’t see. His mask had lenses. Oh! But he talked like he’d eaten a thesaurus,” Tim remembered.

“Fuck.” Jason’s left hand curled into a fist.

“What?” Dick and Tim asked at the same time.

“I know who did it.”

“Oh.” That was Tim.

“Who?” That was Dick.

“His name’s Damian al Ghul. He’s Talia’s son. Ra’s’ grandson. Heir to the demon,” Jason said with a trace of mocking reverence.

“He’s a child,” Dick said.

“Yeah. Nine years old, actually. But he’s still one of the best in the League. With his mother, he wouldn’t be allowed to be anything else.” Bitter resentment filled Jason’s voice. He was raised in the League’s ways. Fighting for rank and status, bringing justice through death—I mean, I know I bring justice through death, but it’s not the only way I do it. For him, that’s all he knows. Ra’s always taught him that it made him…better, or something. It got really annoying, the way he talked about it.”

The way Jason was talking sounded like a mix between a bitter rival describing their adversary, and an estranged elder brother talking about his younger sibling who still bought into the family’s ideals.

“Did you…know him well?” Tim ventured.

Jason laughed, quick and harsh. “Not exactly. I trained him for a few months. We didn’t know each other well outside of that, but…”

There’s a particular familiarity that comes from fighting with someone over and over again . Tim had learned it from sparring with his brothers. He’d learned the way Jason mimicked his own style, reflecting each move with the fluidity of water. He’d learned to catch the slightest skip in his technique when Tim used a combination he’d never done before, which gave him the tiniest sliver of time to land a blow. He knew how Dick evaded, dancing away and watching each attack until he found a weak point and launched into the offensive. From there, he

was relentless, using every advantage and coupling strikes with dialogue meant to distract and confuse. Tim also knew that if he let Dick push him back enough, he tended to leave his feet unguarded. He and his brothers' all had their own language in a battle and they'd learned to speak each others' fluently.

"I get it," he said, and Jason nodded.

"Yeah. I've got no idea why he'd be in Gotham, though. Especially wearing that. Those definitely aren't League clothes." Shaking his head, Jason frowned. "It doesn't make any sense."

That was when the final piece revealed itself from the fog in Tim's brain, and all the pieces clicked together into a picture that Tim really fucking hated. He shut his eyes. "Oh, god."

"What?" Dick asked.

"I think I know why he's in Gotham," Tim said, grimacing. "And I don't think any of us are going to like it."

"Of course." Jason lifted one brow. "What else is new? What is it, baby bird?"

"He's also Batman's son."

For a long moment, no one said anything. Then Jason said, "Not to be rude or anything, Timmy, but the *fuck* ?"

"How'd you find that out?" Dick asked, sounding like he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

Tim shifted around, pushing himself up to sitting. The movement sent pain shooting through…well, all of him, but he didn't want to have this conversation laying down. Not the next part, anyway. Jason and Dick followed his lead, shifting to sitting. Jason moved back a little and sat cross legged facing both of them. "He told me. He called himself 'his true successor'."

"Sounds like something Damian'd say," Jason muttered.

"That's not all of it, though," Tim said.

"It can't possibly be worse than the first part," Jason said. "Let's hear it."

Tim took a breath and braced for the impact of his next sentence.

“Batman is Bruce Wayne.”

Again, Jason and Dick were silent for a long time. A *long* time. Dick’s expression was stony, and Jason’s was…rapidly going through a lot of emotions. The silence lasted so long that Tim found himself itching to apologize, though he couldn’t say exactly what for. Then:

“Are you telling me Talia and Bruce had *sex* ?” Jason burst out. Tim blinked in surprise as his brother seemed to go through all five stages of grief. “Dude, gross. She’s like my *mom* . I mean, my *mom* , no. But my weird, sort of pseudo assassin cult mom? Yeah. *Ugh* .” Jason put his head in his hands. “That can’t be real.”

“It can’t be,” Dick said, voice dead serious. “Bruce is *dead* . We saw it.”

“I mean…we didn’t, really,” Tim said. “We just assumed he was in the Manor when it burned. If he had been, wouldn’t he…wouldn’t he have saved us?”

“If he were *Batman* , wouldn’t he have saved us?” Dick countered. “I saw him in the window, Tim. We saw his *body* . He’s gone.” Dick’s eyes were rapidly turning stormy, pain and anger mixing with confusion and fear.

“We saw a body burned beyond identification. Bruce had the money to fake his own death.”

“Why the fuck would *Bruce* fake his own death?”

“If he was Batman!”

“I mean…it does make sense, Dick,” Jason spoke up. He still looked vaguely disgusted by the idea that Bruce and Talia had had sex, but other than that, his gaze was calculating, weighing the possibilities and removing the untruths. “He knows who you are beneath the mask. He knew who I was when he stopped you on that roof. No one knew we were related, no one but us and him and Alfred. And…you know there were suspicious things when we were kids.”

“What, you mean how he wasn’t home at night?” Dick’s voice was pitched up, tears welling in his eyes as hysterics threatened to overtake him. “He ran a company, Jay. CEO’s always work late.”

“What about the injuries?”

He had explanations for all of them!"

"We saw how coordinated he was, Dick. He never would have fallen down the stairs that many times. If he did, we would have heard it at least once." Jason was gentle now, meeting Dick's eyes with a level gaze. "It makes sense, Robin."

Tears spilled down Dick's face. He made no move to wipe them away. He didn't sob, or make any noise. He just sat, staring at Jason while tears ran down his cheeks. Tim leaned against him, trying to offer comfort the way he knew Dick needed. The contact seemed to wake him up.

Dick stood. "I'm going for a run."

Read: he was going to flip around on the roofs. Tim would've liked him to stay—he wasn't feeling too great about this development himself, and Jason definitely wasn't, and he could tell neither of them wanted to be separated from their big brother. But he was inclined to let Dick go, as long as going out would help him.

He didn't need to stop him, as it turned out.

Dick was barely out of Tim's room when the sirens started blaring, loud and sharp. Four long wails, followed by two short screeches.

An Arkham breakout. A big one.

In under a second, Dick was back in Tim's room with the door shut. He got back on the bed, and the three of them instinctively huddled close to each other while Jason dug out his phone to read the announcement.

"Four got out," he said, face washed out by the blue light of his phone. "Riddler, Poison Ivy, Two-Face—"

His face went white, and he dropped the phone. Dick picked it up, and his eyes widened when he saw the screen. Without saying anything, he tilted it so Tim could see.

The final headshot was a milk-white face, garishly painted. Red lipstick covered his lips and the scars extending them in a grotesque smile. Lank green hair framed his face, hanging to just above his chin.

The Joker was out of Arkham.

Chapter End Notes

WELP

Chapter 28: Lost Bird, Not This Shit Again

Chapter Notes

> Whooo, Arkham breakout! This will absolutely not trigger any trauma! For a song, let's say Ship in a Bottle by fin.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: flashbacks
>
> Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tell me, which hurts more? A or B?

Jason clutched the sides of the toilet bowl, stomach heaving. He'd barely made it to the bathroom before the contents of his stomach came up, leaving his throat burning, his eyes stinging, and all of him shaking.

Behind him, Dick rubbed his back gently. When Jason had bolted from the room, he'd followed. Tim was still in bed, seeing as he couldn't walk, but he could probably hear what was being said. "It's alright, Little Wing," he murmured. "You're okay. You're safe."

And Jason knew that. He knew, realistically, that the Joker wasn't coming for him. He didn't even know Jason was *alive.* This was an Arkham break like any other. Batman and the police would get the rogues back within days.

But none of that mattered, because the Joker was out there. He was out there, and Jason knew he had a plan because there was always some kind of plan with the Joker, and if Batman—Bruce—didn't stop him, so many people were going to get hurt. Because…

Bruce was Batman.

Jason froze.

Bruce had been as good as a father to him. He'd been the one to help Jason with his homework, and explain current events, and show up at school functions to support him. He'd shown Jason the library and where they kept the classics. He'd read Austin because Jason asked him to.

And Jason had been trapped in that warehouse and murdered, and Bruce never came.

Worse, he never did anything to avenge him.

Jason remembered the loyalty he'd felt towards Bruce. For him, getting a second chance at a loving family was a blessing. If Bruce had asked him to jump, Jason would have hesitated only to ask how high. If the Joker had killed Bruce, Jason wouldn't have stopped until the bastard was dead.

"Jaybird, what's wrong?" Dick asked.

The words scraped Jason's already raw throat. "He didn't save me."

"Oh." Comprehension softened Dick's voice. He resumed rubbing Jason's back, gentle and reassuring. "I'm sorry, Little Wing."

Jason snorted wetly. "'S not your fault. It's not even really his. I shouldn't have thought I was as important to him as he was to me." He really was an idiot, wasn't he? Jason wasn't Bruce's kid. He wasn't even a neighbor. He was just some kid Dick had met on the walk home from school one day and decided to be his friend.

"You were—" Dick started, then stopped short. Stomach calming down some, Jason scooted away from the toilet to lean against the wall. Dick's face had turned thoughtful(not in a good way). He looked like he'd just taken a bite of something disgusting but wasn't allowed to spit it out.

"I think," he finally continued, "that none of us were as important to him as we thought."

Jason tilted his head. "Why?"

"You don't usually leave people you care about in the fire you set, right?"

The air rushed out of Jason like he'd been punched. "Oh."

"Yeah."

He hadn't even considered that yet. It had been Bruce who set the fire. He'd planned all of it, and apparently his vision hadn't involved keeping the three of them safe. The three of them had almost died. Tim, Jason knew, had to be treated for smoke inhalation. Dick still

had the burn scar on his side. For his part, until the Lazarus Pit revived him, Jason hadn't been able to run more than a minute before his lungs couldn't get enough air.

He leaned back against the wall. "Shit."

"Yeah," Dick said again. His gaze was resigned as he stared at the bathroom's floor tiles. "Are you feeling better?" Jason nodded. "Let's go back, then."

There were no questions about who sat where when they got back to Tim's room. All three of them ended up squeezed together on the bed. This time, Jason was in the middle. Tim's head was on his shoulder, hair tickling Jason's nose. Dick had his arm around both of them.

"You guys should go out," Tim said. "People will need you tonight."

"And leave you? No fucking chance." Fear ran through Jason's spine at the very thought. He could just see it, him and Dick gone and the door breaking down, Tim pressing his panic button too late and them getting home to an empty house with blood on the floors. From the look they shared, Dick felt the same.

Laughter rang in his ears. Jason shook his head to remove it.

"I'll be fine," Tim argued.

"Baby bird, just listen to me. We aren't leaving you alone. Not with this." Something in Jason's voice must have convinced him, because Tim didn't argue again. Thank god. Jason didn't know how long he could stay reasonable in this state.

"Speaking of which," Dick said, "We might want to move downstairs. You know, to the place with the surveillance system, and the weapons, and the armor…"

"Yeah, yeah, we get it." Jason rolled off the edge of the bed. When Tim tried to follow him, he put up a hand. "Uh-uh, baby bird. You're not walking on that leg."

"I'm fine—hey!" Tim yelped when Dick scooped him up to carry him bridal style, carefully avoiding his injuries. "I can walk fine!"

"Yeah, and I've never committed a felony," Jason deadpanned. "Just accept it, Timmy."

Because he had no other choice, Tim did accept it. He allowed Dick to carry him downstairs and to the room they had all their supplies in, Jason at their heels. Inside, Dick deposited him on the cot in their sort-of-kind-of medbay area. They hadn't brought Tim there after the whole *Damian attacking him* deal because the cot was uncomfortable as fuck, and Dick and Jason could just carry the medical supplies back and forth from Tim's room as needed.

While Tim got situated and Dick went to the kitchen to get more coffee, Jason turned on the computer setup and put on three different news feeds, a police scanner, and a Batman tracking blog. It wasn't perfectly accurate, but it was the best one he'd seen so far.

In Robinson Park, Ivy's jungle was back to its full glory. Most likely, she was inside, catching up on the world and figuring out her next move. Poison Ivy had never been one to needlessly incite violence. Almost all her targets were large companies exploiting the environment. Jason had no problem with that. Hell, maybe he'd help her out if she ever needed some.

Two-Face was driving a stolen car down Thirteenth Avenue, followed by a horde of cop cars. From the looks of it, he was heading for the DA's office. The Bat tracker showed him rapidly approaching from a different angle, though. Dent's freedom would probably be short-lived.

The Riddler and the Joker were nowhere to be found. The Riddler was expected. He'd hide somewhere and plot for a while. If they didn't find him before he finished, there would be some kind of fucked up hostage situation within a week. It was normal for the Joker to disappear too, but that didn't mean Jason's heart stopped pounding in his chest as he stared at the mugshot on the screen.

Creaking hinges and gentle footsteps signaled Dick's return. He passed a steaming mug to Jason and set his own down on the table.

"Where's mine?" Tim asked.

"Baby bird, you got concussed yesterday. I don't know the exact protocol for what you can and can't consume, but you're not gonna have any caffeine for the next few days at *least* ." Dick handed Tim a glass of water. He gave it an unimpressed look.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously." Dick gently ruffled his hair before picking up his coffee.

“Jay, can I have coffee please?”

“No can do, baby bird,” Jason replied without looking away from the screen. Then he took an extra long drink from his mug. “Really sucks that you can’t have any, though. This is the best pot Dick’s made all day.”

“I hate you.”

Dick snorted as Jason grinned and fake-toasted Tim. “That’s fair.”

“No,” Dick said immediately.

“Come on, let me joke.”

“No put downs, Jaybird,” Dick replied with a shit eating grin.

Jason scoffed. “What, did you hear that in therapy or something?” He’d heard about it once, when his elementary school tried to make him do group therapy. Something about being at risk for developing severe anxiety or whatever.

Dick smiled brighter. “You put yourself down, we put you down.”

“That’s creepy.”

“But also funny.”

“True.”

There wasn’t much else for them to do but monitor the situation and wait. Tim ended up falling asleep—Jason and Dick exchanged twin expressions of shock—, while Jason and Dick continued their thirty hour streak of not sleeping. Until Joker was back in Arkham, Jason didn’t really want to close his eyes. Or be in a room without the lights off.

Even when Dick nodded off in his chair, cheek smushed against the table, Jason kept watching. Two-Face got captured, Ivy stayed in her jungle, and a lead was reported on the Riddler. The Joker remained a mystery, even as the sun began to rise.

Chapter End Notes

> fun fact the put down thing is something someone actually said in therapy once it was funny to us but the therapists didn't think so 👍

Chapter 29: Lonely Bird, What do You Mean You Thought the Green was Just a Coincidence???

Chapter Notes

I'm half asleep right now. There could be a million grammar mistakes in this and I would never know until I look at it tomorrow. Am I still posting it? Yes. I'm adding the no beta tag.

Content Warnings for this chapter: death, mild gore(Joker Venom), violence

Enjoy! :)

Two days after the Arkham breakout, Joker had still not been found. Dick had had to force Jason to take some melatonin, and even then, it took his body's sheer exhaustion to overwhelm his stubborn desire to stay awake, watching the news even as his eyes glazed over. Right now, he was sleeping in the corner of the room, curled up in the massive nest of blankets and pillows they'd scavenged from all around the penthouse.

Tim was similarly balled up on the cot. He'd offered to let either of them take it, but Dick and Jason had shut that down immediately. No way their concussed little brother was sleeping on the floor.

For his part, Dick had been catching fitful naps whenever he felt his body shutting down. No matter how tired he was, Dick couldn't manage to find restful sleep, but at least he was losing consciousness(even if that did mean having nightmares). At the moment, though, he was monitoring the news. When Jason woke up, he would want to hear what was happening.

Two-Face and Riddler had been captured only a few hours after the initial breakout. Two-Face had been apprehended at the DA's office, while Riddler was found traversing the sewers. Apparently he'd been on the hunt for rats.

Ivy was caught just before nightfall, coming out of her jungle for reasons Dick wasn't aware of. Personally, he wished she'd been able to stay free. Really, she was mainly concerned with people who exploited the environment. It wasn't that bad of a reason. But she was back in

Arkham now, and her jungle had gone dormant.

Joker, however, was radio silent. Maybe he'd fled the country. It was wishful thinking—or not, really, seeing as the Joker leaving the country would probably be part of some overarching plan that could only end badly—but the thought still crossed Dick's mind.

On the news, Commissioner Gordon was being interviewed. He looked just as tired as Dick felt. Clutching a travel mug of coffee in one hand, tie loose, he reeled off the straws GCPD was grasping off. Dick sympathized. It wasn't fun to let people down when you were trying your best not to. GCPD may be corrupt to the very highest levels, but Gordon, everyone knew, was one of the only verifiably good cops there.

When he was done giving his interview, Commissioner Gordon disappeared back into the precinct. The reporter was just beginning to summarize her take on his information when the camera suddenly switched to a building engulfed in flames.

A new reporter, this one a short man with dark skin and buzzed hair was explaining the situation. The building had gone up in seconds. People were still inside. Batman wasn't there yet.

Batman wasn't there yet.

Before Dick even processed what he was doing, he'd written a note for Jason and Tim. He dressed in his uniform as fast as possible, put in a lens and an earpiece, and left through the window, grappling up to the roof.

He could see the building from the penthouse. Green flames rose into the sky, casting a sickly glow on the blocks around it. Had it been some kind of chemical manufacturer? Dick hadn't listened closely enough to the reporter.

He reached the building within minutes. Finding a window leading into a room with minimal fire, Dick vaulted inside, rolling to standing and continuing out the door.

The hallway was full of smoke, thick enough to choke on. Dick pulled a rebreather from his belt and secured it on his mouth. The clean air brought relief surging in his mind. This place was too familiar to the Manor, and that wasn't a thought he could afford to get lost in.

Dick went from room to room, calling for anyone who was stuck. The

first three rooms were empty, but in the fourth, he found a group of people in business attire. They were huddled in the corner, eyes wide with panic. When they saw him, they all let out cries of shock.

“Come with me!” Dick called(yes, it was generic, but sue him. He didn’t have time to think of something funnier). The rebreather distorted his voice, but the people got the message. He got them all to grab hands and follow him out, towards the window he’d used to get in.

“Hey, Dick? What are you doing?”

Dick jumped at Tim’s voice in his ear, causing the people he was with to gasp. “Specter,” he said, continuing down the hall, “You were asleep.”

“I woke up. And you *should* have woken me up when you left. You’ve been a vigilante for what, a few months? And you choose *now* to run into a burning building alone?”

“This isn’t the best time to chew me out, Spec,” Dick hissed, flinching away from a burst of flame near his shoulder. He and the others reached the room with the window.

“Seriously, Aegis. This is a bad idea. You need to come home.”

“While there’s still people in here?”

“Unless you want me to wake Jay up and tell him you went into a building burning *green flames* while the *Joker* is on the loose, yeah. Batman’s on his way, I see him on street cameras. He’ll handle it.”

Dick cursed, forcing the window back open. “Fine. You’re acting like a helicopter mom.”

“Okay.” That had been meant as an insult, and Tim had taken it as an observation. Oh, well. Dick could sulk when he got back.

He turned to face the people with him. “Okay, I need you to climb from here to the roof next to it—” Loud, obnoxious laughter cut him off.

“Shit,” Tim said.

The civilians had broken out into grotesque smiles, laughter echoing from their mouths with inhuman ferocity. They clutched their sides

and staggered around the room. Dick couldn't tell if they knew where they were anymore.

"Specter, don't watch this," he said, even as he stared in horror, unable to look away as the first person fell and didn't get back up.

"Baby bird? Why're you sitting—" and oh fuck, that was Jason, groggy from sleep and moving towards the computers. "—What the fuck. Dick?"

"You know, you guys are really bad at codenames today."

"Dick, *what are you doing* ?" Jason's voice was an octave higher. Something clattered to the ground on their side, and neither of them moved to retrieve it.

When Dick didn't answer, Tim did. "He's at the Tanner Building. The Joker attacked."

Jason stood silently for a few seconds. Then: "Dick, why are you going after the *fucking* Joker?"

"I didn't *know* it was him!" Dick defended himself. All three civilians were dead. He couldn't look away from one lady, face stretched horribly wide in a smile even as her eyes had been puffy with tears. "I thought it was a chemical making the building burn green."

"Yeah, Joker Venom!" Jason cried. "Aegis, get the hell out of there right now, or I swear I'm coming after you."

"But what if he's here? What if I can get him?" As he said it, anger sparked in Dick's gut. If the Joker was here, Dick could find him. He could make him pay for what he did to Jason.

"If the Joker's there, you need to *leave. Now* ." The desperation in Jason's tone was enough to make Dick relent.

"Fine," he muttered.

"Keep your rebreather on until you're a few buildings away," Tim told him as he climbed out the window onto the next roof over. "The Venom's probably in the smoke."

"Got it. What's the fastest way home, Specter?"

"Finding it now."

“Ooh, who are you talking to?” Jason gasped, Tim cursed, and Dick’s blood went cold. He spun around, taking a few steps back as he did so.

The Joker had found a new suit that was somehow the exact same as the one he’d had last time he’d gotten out of Arkham. Seriously, did he have a personal seamstress? A stockpile of purple suits? A monopoly on the fabric? And that wasn’t even getting started on the makeup.

Despite the fact that he’d definitely had access to a shower, the Joker’s hair was still greasy. He had gotten it cut, so now it hung to his ears instead of his chin. It did not make him less threatening.

“Dick, *run* ,” Jason hissed.

“And who are you?” The Joker asked. His expressions were chronically exaggerated, and the curiosity he wore now was no different. There was a gun in his hand.

Where was Batman?

When Dick didn’t speak, the Joker pouted. “It’s rude not to answer when asked, you know.” His eyes turned bright. “Did you like the show? I put a lot of effort in. I’ve never put my Venom into explosives, but there’s a first time for everything!” He laughed to himself. The sound was just as fake as his expressions.

“Dick, you’ve got to go,” Tim said. His voice was tight, on the edge of panic. Dick backed up farther.

The Joker frowned. “You know, it’s also rude to leave a party early.” He raised the gun to point at Dick’s head. “And without even engaging in the festivities!”

Dick did not want to engage in the festivities, thank you very much. He reached back for his escrima sticks. Surprisingly, the Joker didn’t shoot him. His grin widened.

“There we go. Finally, some manners.” So he wanted a fight. Dick could do that. He’d enjoy it.

“Dick, move your ass right fucking now. I’m on my way over.” Dick heard magazines going into Jason’s guns. Alright, scratch that, he wanted to keep the Joker as far away from his little brother as possible. He turned on his heel and ran in a zigzagging pattern across the roof.

“Aww, don’t run!” The Joker’s gun went off. Dick kept going. “We were just about to have fun!”

As much as he wanted to stay on the roofs where he was most comfortable, all the ones in a three block radius were low enough that Joker could keep shooting at him. Retrieving his grapple gun from his belt, Dick ran for the edge. He’d grapple a few blocks to a higher roof, then run back.

He jumped, firing the grapple at a building across the road. Right before he started to fall, a bullet tore through his thigh. Dick yelled. He held onto the grapple gun for dear life as he swung, blood pouring down his leg.

“Hey, Spec? Help?” he managed to get out, between concentrating on not falling to his death and not blacking out from the pain in his leg.

“Get on a roof when it’s safe. Hood’s coming to get you.”

“Great,” Dick forced out. He swung a little farther, putting another two blocks between himself and the burning building(and the Joker), before scaling a fire escape with great difficulty and pulling himself onto the roof.

Barely five minutes later, a heavy thud announced Jason’s arrival. He ran over and dropped to crouch by Dick’s side. “You’re an idiot.”

“Wow, it’s good to see you too, assface,” Dick replied as his brother carefully examined his leg. “Is it fine?”

“ *Is it fine?* ” Jason mimicked. “There’s an exit wound, if that’s what you’re asking, but no, Robin. It’s a bullet wound. It is not *fine* .”

“Someone’s cranky.”

“I have a fucking right to be!” Jason exclaimed, pulling out bandages to wrap the injury until they could get back. “You shouldn’t have gone out without telling us! You shouldn’t have gone out when you knew the Joker was out, too! You shouldn’t have gone out to a building that was *burning fucking green!* The hell, Aegis?”

“I’m sorry!” Dick hissed when Jason began securing the bandages over the wound. “I didn’t know it was him, honestly. I just heard that Batman wasn’t there, and I knew people were dying, and I wanted to help!”

“Yeah, well, good for you and your big heart,” Jason grumbled. “What if we’d lost you and all you’d left behind was a note?”

Genuine guilt washed over Dick at that. He hadn’t considered dying. That was stupid, really, seeing as he’d literally decided to run into a burning building, but…he never really thought about dying. Not when he was about to go on patrol, anyway. There was always the threat that he or Jason wouldn't make it back. At some point he’d just tuned it out. There was so much fear involved in their lives that at some point, Dick had just stopped noticing it.

He was noticing it now. Thinking of Jason and Tim alone in the penthouse, waking up to see his body on the news, burned or bloody or grinning, unmasked for everyone to see…protectiveness welled up inside him. Dick couldn’t leave them alone. Not again.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated, more sincerely this time. Jason had finished tying the bandages. He looked up from where he’d been staring at the ground. In his rush to get out, he’d only put on a domino, neglecting his helmet. Dick could see the worry lines in his little brother's face. “I won’t do it again.”

Jason’s response was suspicious, sending another wave of guilt crashing over Dick. “You promise?”

“I promise.” Dick held out a hand and Jason pulled him up, letting Dick lean on him. “Let’s go back to the penthouse. I’ll make hot chocolate, okay? Then we’ll all get some more sleep.”

“Actually, I’ll make the hot chocolate,” Tim said. “You’re not allowed to stand.”

“ *Actually* , if we’re going by that logic, I’m making it,” Jason corrected. “Seriously, how did both of you get your legs fucked up this close together? Specter wasn’t even trying.”

“I wasn’t trying either!” Dick protested.

“Yeah, but you still knew what you were getting into.” Dick shoved Jason playfully, and Jason pretended like he was going to duck out from under Dick’s arm. This only made Dick cling tighter, causing both of them to stumble. “Jesus, I know I’m taller, but you know you can still throw your weight around, right?”

“Of course. It’s my job.” Dick gave him a shit-eating grin. “So, you’re making the hot chocolate?”

“Yeah,” Jason grumbled, “Seeing as you and baby bird are now *both* on bed rest for the foreseeable future.”

“Can I have the blue mug?”

“I will make you walk home alone,” Jason threatened.

Dick laughed. Like Tim would let him.

“Yes, you can have the blue mug.”

Chapter 30: Little Bird, They Aren't Crows but They're Still a Murder

Chapter Notes

> Does the chapter title make sense? Not completely. Do I care? No. Anyway, this one's shorter. It's more of a transitiony type thing. I can't really do much with two thirds of the main characters unable to walk(you can see that I didn't plan ahead).
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: mentions of death, bad parents
>
> Enjoy! :)

The three brothers were seated in the blanket nest with their hot chocolate. Tim had been allowed to leave his cot when he complained about Dick not having to stay on one too. As the only person currently capable of walking and therefore the one in charge, Jason had agreed. Tim suspected his decision was fueled in no small part by the fact that he was still annoyed with Dick for running into a Joker attack.

On the computer, the fight between Batman and the Joker was being televised. Jason, Dick, and Tim were watching silently. None of them said anything, but they all knew it was different. It wasn't just Batman they were watching anymore. It was Bruce.

Tim could see it now, the faintest similarities in their movements. Bruce and Batman possessed the same powerful grace, the same surety. It was fascinating to watch.

Since he'd figured it out, Tim hadn't had any real trouble wrapping his head around the fact that his sort-of father figure was not only alive, but the city's resident vigilante. The thing he'd been struggling most with was understanding why Bruce faked his death in the first place.

Everything had been going fine, as far as Tim knew, both in their normal lives and in Gotham's crime scene. They'd had a home. All three boys' report cards were taped to the fridge. They had their own bedrooms in the Manor, but most nights they ended up piling into one to sleep in a tangle of limbs, only for Alfred to find them the next morning and tell them that they really should all use their own beds. He never meant it. Tim always got the feeling he just said it to remind them they each had their own room in the Manor, a place to call their own.

As for the rest of the city, it had been quiet. Every rogue on Batman's list was in Arkham or otherwise incarcerated. Batman and the GCPD had had a string of victories in the past weeks. Crime was at a record low. Everything had seemed…good.

No matter how hard he tried, Tim couldn't understand why Bruce had abandoned them all. Maybe he just hadn't wanted to take care of three kids anymore.

But that couldn't be right. Bruce had loved them. Or at least, he'd loved Dick and Jason. Tim had heard him one night talking to Alfred. He'd been considering suing Jason's parents for custody and adopting him. No such plans had been in the works for Tim, of course, but that was fine. He had two parents who were alive and well. He didn't need to be adopted by Bruce.

(Even if the man had felt more like a parent to him than both his biological ones combined. That bridge was burned now, anyways.)

On the TV, Batman delivered the final blow. The Joker fell, unconscious, and the Bat pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

"He's never going to kill him, is he?" Tim asked. Jason and Dick both jerked around to look at him. "He knows all those people in there are dead, and he's just going to put him back in Arkham." There was no anger in his voice, only curiosity. Tim wasn't angry. But he was frustrated.

"Yeah," Jason said. He was definitely angry. Indignation seethed from his words as his eyes darkened. "Yeah, he's just going to lock him up again. Not that it matters. He'll escape again within a few months, and then another couple hundred people will die horribly, and then Batman still won't do anything different."

Dick sighed. "He talks so much about helping Gotham. Fixing it, making it better. But all he's done is make another cycle that won't end. The Joker's never going to stop hurting people."

Was it wrong that the people he'd killed weren't what Tim hated most about the Joker?

Of course he hated it. It made his stomach turn every time the news reported on one of the Joker's attacks, showing the bodies and the smiles and the blood. He hated the laughter played over every recording. He hated the grinning mugshot, the face of a man who took nothing but pleasure from the pain he caused.

But what Tim hated more were the faces he'd seen Jason make in his sleep. The sounds of vomit from the bathroom the other night had almost made him puke too. He despised the fear in Jason's face when he saw the Joker through Dick's eyes, the pained whimper he'd tried to stifle.

The Joker had hurt his brother. He was still hurting him, and for that, Tim was furious.

"Maybe we should handle him, then," he said.

Jason and Dick went quiet, but it wasn't a horrified silence. Instead, it was contemplative.

"Baby bird, that's a really big thing to decide," Jason said slowly.

"Have you never thought about it?"

"Of course I have. I was actually…" Jason glanced down. "I had a plan, before I found you guys. I was going to kill him."

"How?" Dick asked.

Jason twisted his hands in his lap, crossing and uncrossing his fingers. "I was taking over a lot of Black Mask's territory. I put a lot of the bosses who were paying him for protection in my pocket. The goal was for him to get so desperate to stop me that he broke the Joker out of Arkham to kill me. He's unhinged enough to think it'd work."

"That's not a really reliable plan," Tim said.

Jason gave him a mock offended look. "Have you got a better one, Timmy?"

Tim shrugged. "I mean, you could just break into Arkham and kill him there. You could even make it look like an accident, if you wanted."

"I'm not sure if I should be proud or concerned about how easily you came up with that," Dick said. He'd been quiet, for the most part, but he'd nodded along to Tim's suggestion. Tim knew that if he and Jason decided on a course of action, Dick would follow.

"Be either," Tim said. "I don't have a preference."

Dick snorted before turning serious. "Do you mean it, though?" He glanced between Jason and Tim with a searching gaze. "Is this something you really want to try?"

The sudden realness made Tim shrink back. He didn't care about the Joker dying. He really didn't. But to decide it beforehand? To go into Arkham, knowing as they did so that they had the intention of taking someone's life, even someone as horrible as the Joker? It went against some moral part deep inside him.

But when Tim looked at Jason, he saw the decision made in his brother's eyes. It had been made months ago, apparently.

"I'll do it, if you two want to," he said.

Tim looked at Dick, who was already nodding. Like he'd thought: their big brother would follow them to the end.

And Tim? Well, to Tim, it all came down to Jason. His brother was the only person the Joker had murdered who came back. In his opinion, Jason was the only person who had the right to decide the Joker's fate, and Jason had spoken.

"I'm in," Tim said.

And just like that, they'd decided. They were going to kill the Joker.

Chapter 31: Lost Bird, I am Going to Remove Batman's Head

Chapter Notes

I had to look up a McDonald's menu for this. That's a new one. Song for this one is Father by The Front Bottoms! Or any song about shitty dads! Hopefully that's a good warning for what this chapter will be!

Content Warning's for this chapter: bad parents

Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of course, deciding to kill the guy who killed you didn't mean it was going to happen fast. The Joker was going back to Arkham, and Dick, Tim, and Jason needed to plan. That would take time, and in the interim, Jason still had a duty as the Red Hood.

A week after the Joker's attack, he was out on patrol. Tim and Dick were at the penthouse, watching on comms. Dick was still pouting over the fact that Tim was now allowed to walk around on crutches while he had to stay in bed.

Tim, currently, was trying to convince Jason to bring home coffee. Jason was halfway through his patrol. It was one in the morning.

"Specter, I swear to god, if you ask for coffee one more time, I'm going to make you go to bed and have Aegis run comms for the rest of the night," he said, jogging across a section of townhouse roofs in the middle of Crime Alley.

"You get to drink it," Tim retorted.

"Yes! Because it's one a.m., and if I'm not awake enough, I'll get stabbed!" Jason hissed. "Meanwhile *you* , baby bird, are thirteen years old, should not be drinking as much caffeine as we let you have, and are not in imminent danger of being stabbed." *And never would be* , he silently added.

"But I want coffee."

Jason stopped moving to crouch and put his head in his hands, letting

out a long, suffering groan.

“Now look what you’ve done, Spec. You’ve broken him,” Dick’s sarcastic voice came through the earpiece.

“He should’ve brought me coffee, then.” In his mind’s eye, Jason could see Tim, slouched in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest, staring matter-of-factly at Dick. Dick would have one brow raised and arms crossed to mimic Tim, head tilted with his own brand of *you think you can be more sarcastic than me? I’m Dick Grayson. Fucking try.*

“If he brought you coffee, you wouldn’t have slept again. How many days would that make it now, baby bird?”

Silence filled the air for a few seconds while Jason pictured Tim trying to reason his way out of losing the argument. “Four,” he finally said sheepishly.

“Exactly. Four. At some point, we’re gonna get you actual sleep meds, Spec.”

“Sure. Whatever.” Tim’s tone closed off like it always did when his brothers brought up mental health, or therapy, or medication of any kind. They’d only tried it a few times over the past few months, and Tim had shut down every time.

In Jason’s mind, the Joker’s death had become a hurdle, the thing to aim for. If they could kill the Joker, enough weight would be lifted from their lives that he and Dick could convince Tim to get therapy. They could get therapy themselves. They could choose a place to live that wasn’t a safehouse, but a home. No matter how comfortable they’d been in the warehouse and the penthouse, there was always the underlying feeling of impermanence. Those places were meant to hide out in. That had been fine for Jason when he was on his own. By himself, that had been how he was happy.

But now, with two brothers and the possibility of a life past just vigilantism, Jason wanted a home. He wanted an apartment with three bedrooms decorated the way each of them wanted. He wanted to sue the Drake’s for custody of Tim and know that his little brother would be there every day, doing homework or practicing with his bo, or whatever else his brilliant mind came up with. He wanted to tell Dick about the gym he’d seen open a few days ago that was hiring gymnastics coaches to teach kids and have the stupid idiot’s protein shakes taking up room in the fridge.

Once the Joker was gone, he promised himself. Once the Joker was gone, they could be happy.

Just a little while longer.

Pushing himself to his feet, Jason cut off Dick and Tim's bickering. "Baby bird, if I bring you coffee, will you sleep as soon as it wears off during the day?"

"Yes," Tim replied instantly, at the same time as Dick yelled, " *No!"*

"I thought we were on the same side, Hood," Dick whined. Jason could see the wounded expression.

"Hey, as long as Specter gets some sleep, I'll count it as a win." Besides, Tim didn't need to know he was ordering decaf. Jason would turn off his earpiece on the way back.

"You're weak."

"I'm a negotiator."

Behind Jason, he heard someone land lightly on the roof. *Batman* . He spun around, one gun drawn and aimed with the safety off. Tim inhaled sharply.

Not Batman .

Jason didn't put the safety back on. "What are you doing here, demon brat," he said, making it very clear that the question was a formal way of saying *fuck off* . Of course, the gun probably conveyed that message too, but he and Damian were from the League. A weapon was as commonplace as a sock.

"I could ask you the same, Todd." Damian crossed his arms. He was wearing the suit Tim had described, traffic colors and all. The utility belt around his waist was a yellow version of the one Bruce wore.

"I asked first."

"Tt. Your immaturity is why you never succeeded in the League." Actually, Jason never succeeded in the League because he didn't *want* to, thank you very much, and the added fact that, oh yeah, he'd run away. Damian wouldn't care about that, though, so he just stayed quiet. The kid seemed to be waiting for Jason to give in. He didn't realize that Jason would not, in fact, be letting a fucking nine year old

boss him around, until he tilted his head in a *well?* gesture. “I was sent to live with my father.”

“Bruce.”

Damian smirked. “So, Drake is the one in your ear.”

Rage boiled up in Jason’s stomach, green fog collecting at the edges of his vision. He pushed it away. Damian was a child. An obnoxious, entitled child who tried to kill Jason’s baby brother, but a child nonetheless. He was not going to kill him.

“Is that why you attacked him?” he growled, trading his gun for a knife. It would be better for non-fatal fighting. “Because you *thought* he was helping us?” Even as he said it, guilt washed over Jason. He should have protected Tim better. He shouldn’t have let Bruce know there was someone helping him and Dick at all.

Damian still hadn’t moved to draw any of his weapons, despite the two katanas he wore on his back. Weird. When they were in the League, Damian had always preferred to talk through fighting. “It was a calculated guess,” he said smugly.

“Did Bruce put you up to it?”

That caught Damian off guard. “No,” he said, shifting just slightly. “I went after Drake on my own judgment.”

“Ohh, so your dad doesn’t know that you attacked an innocent kid to test a theory. You know, I’m not sure if you’ve heard, but Batman doesn’t do murder, or execution, or any of those synonyms.” Though Damian couldn’t see it through the helmet, Jason gave him a sardonic smile. “I don’t think he’d be too happy hearing what you’ve done.”

“Don’t presume to know what my father will tolerate,” Damian snapped. “He understands that certain things must be done in the fight for justice.”

Jason let out a bark of laughter, abrupt and empty. “Oh yeah, right. Certain things? Like abandoning young children in a burning building to fake his own death? Or letting the Joker live? Tell me, Dami, what do you think Talia would do about him?”

There was no need for Damian to answer. They both knew what Talia would do. If it had been her under Batman’s cowl, the Joker would have been dead long ago, if not for his initial crimes, then for what

he'd done to Jason. The murder of any child, let alone one she cared for, was cause enough for death.

Damian scowled. "Grandfather knows that my father has weaknesses. That's why he sent me. I'm supposed to remind him of what has to be done."

"A nine year old kid?" Jason scoffed. Damian scowled. His youth had always been a sore spot in the League, surrounded by experienced adults who were only too happy to push him aside. "Wow. The demon's head, putting his hope on a fourth grader."

"I am no ordinary child," Damian growled.

"Right. You're a trained assassin. So am I, Dami. But now you're, what? Batman's sidekick? What does that R on your suit even stand for?"

Damian drew himself up like he was about to give a rehearsed speech. "Robin."

Cold shock flooded Jason's mind. In his ear, Dick gasped and Tim let out a soft, "what?". That was apparently not the reaction Damian had expected. He cocked his head, frowning at Jason.

"What's wrong with you?"

The words flipped a switch, and all Jason's surprise turned to anger within half a second. Not anger at Damian. The League had never been interested in the circus.

As for Bruce…

He'd been there the night Dick's parents died. He'd seen their performance, seen the colors they wore that Jason was only just now recognizing in Damian's clothes. He'd heard Dick's nickname, used almost as much as his real one. In several ways, that name was all Dick had left of his life before his parents died.

And now here Damian stood. Robin. Yellow, green, and red. Bruce Wayne's son. Cut and pasted from a different life into a strange mockery of Dick's.

"Did he give you that name?" Jason asked softly, barely holding back his fury.

“Yes.” Damian sensed something was wrong. His hand drifted back towards his katana. He didn’t know that he wasn’t the one in danger.

All Jason could think was, *what the hell is wrong with this man?*

“Right. Okay.” Jason’s voice had turned glass-sharp. “I’m going to give you some advice, Dami.”

Damian straightened, re-crossing his arms. “What?”

“Ask Bruce why he chose to call you that. Come find us if you don’t like the answer.” Damian looked like he was about to bite Jason’s head off for insinuating that Bruce had done something wrong, but Jason didn’t have the shits to give required to listen to it. He turned and sprinted off the roof, grappling several blocks away.

Dick and Tim were still silent. Alone on the roof, Jason took a few moments to get his bearings. Damian wouldn’t follow him. He’d know there was nothing useful he could get out of Jason. Most likely, he’d only found him in the first place to piss him off.

When he’d collected himself and neither of his brothers had said anything, Jason lifted a hand to his ear. “I’m going to get us all coffee,” he said. “I’m gonna turn off my comms. I think…I just need some time to think. Okay?”

Silence, still. Then Tim’s voice in a barely audible whisper. “Okay.”

“Okay.” Jason turned off his earpiece and removed it from his ear. He shoved it in his pocket and began the trip to a McDonald’s he knew was nearby. Dick liked their frappé’s for whatever reason, Tim would drink anything caffeinated, and Jason would drink four iced coffees in a row if it meant he could make his brain move fast enough to lose all coherent thought. He didn’t bother to get Tim’s drink without caffeine. They all needed something to shock their systems after that encounter(though to Tim, the decaf probably *would* shock him).

To their credit, the employee serving him didn’t react to Jason’s helmet at all. They took his order without breaking their exhausted stare once.

He walked the rest of the way back to the apartment. No one accosted him. The Red Hood had gained enough of a reputation that he could carry his McDonald’s home in peace, even at two in the morning.

Honestly, it was lucky for them. Jason’s vision was still tinged green,

anger at Bruce raging in his mind. He'd pity anyone trying to fuck with him tonight.

Chapter End Notes

> DO YOU SEE WHY I NAMED THE CHAPTER WHAT I DID BRUCE IS SUCH A BITCH I HATE HIM SO MUCH I WROTE THIS AND I AM FURIOUS.

Chapter 32: Lonely Bird, So Fucking Angry

Chapter Notes

This one's not super long, I'm half asleep.

No CW's for this chapter.

Enjoy! :)

Dick should probably think of something to say soon. In the last ten minutes, Tim had only watched him more intensely, waiting for him to explode or shatter or whatever you were supposed to do when your former father gave a nine year old your name.

Dick was sitting perfectly still, because he knew that the moment he moved he would run.

He was so mad. He wanted to scream, he wanted to punch something. He wanted to punch *Bruce* . He wanted to be outside, in the open air on the rooftops, running as fast as he could until everything he'd just heard couldn't keep up.

But he'd been *shot* in his fucking *leg* , and now Dick was trapped in the fucking penthouse where he couldn't scream or yell or hit things, because Tim and Jason didn't deserve to see that. Not with their family histories.

"Dick," Tim said, apprehensive and quiet.

"I'm fine, baby bird." Dick tried to make himself sound fine. What came out was flat, emotionless, and not at all convincing. He glowered at the floor.

"No you aren't."

Of course Tim realized that. Of course Tim knew how he was feeling. It wasn't hard to connect the dots. But did that mean Dick liked it? No. He hated it. He didn't want people to baby him, to act like he was fragile and needed help because his not-dad who'd abandoned them in a burning building had continued to be terrible. This should have been expected. Of course Bruce had a kid. Of course that kid was a trained assassin. Why wouldn't he be? If Alfred had been Superman, Dick wouldn't have been surprised.

The elevator dinged and Jason appeared, holding a McDonald's drink tray. He put it down on the desk between Tim and Dick and pulled off his helmet, revealing eyes that were still slightly green and sweaty hair stuck flat to his head.

"Take a shower," Dick said when Jason opened his mouth. Jason shut it and went upstairs. The shower turned on a few minutes later. Good. He could avoid the conversation a while longer.

Inevitably, though, Jason returned, hair dripping and clad in a set of gray sweats. The green had fully faded from his eyes. He plopped himself down in a rolly chair and scooted his way to the desk, grabbing both the iced coffees. Tim was clutching his like a lifeline. Dick had his frappé in hand, mindlessy sipping. He wasn't sure when he'd last taken a breath.

"Bruce is a dick," Jason said. Just that. Not even looking at Dick.

"I'm a Dick, actually. Bruce is a piece of shit," Dick replied. Jason snorted, nearly choking on his coffee.

"He really is," Tim agreed.

The three of them lapsed into silence after that. They would have to talk about it. Dick knew they would. Damian was a new asset to Batman, and he was also a kid. None of them were exactly jumping for joy at the fact that they might have to fight him(Dick would, though. No one tried to hurt his brother and got away with it.). They were going to have to factor what they'd learned from him into their plans.

None of that changed the fact that Dick still wanted to run. No doubt Jason and Tim could sense it. Normally when he was upset, Dick wanted to be close to people. Isolation was his brothers' poison.

But anger was boiling inside him. Dick felt like a piece of pottery left in the kiln with an air bubble, about to explode. Cracks were forming, and there was no way to turn off the heat.

""We're still going with the plan, right?" Tim asked. Talking about it without talking about it. He was good at that. Sometimes Dick wished he didn't know why.

"'Course we're still going with the plan, baby bird." Dick reached out to ruffle Tim's hair. There was a robotic-ness to the movement, but he ignored it.

“Good.”

“Dick,” Jason said. Oh great. *Here we go* . “After what he said…”

“I’m fine. And we all know his name, Jay. You can just say Damian. He’s not fucking Voldemort.”

“Well, neither is Voldemort apparently, or you wouldn’t have used his name.” Jason smirked. It was annoyingly little brotherly of him, and Dick appreciated it. “Still. Bruce is a fucked up son of a bitch. You’re allowed to react to that.”

“Not really,” Dick said. “I can’t leave. I can’t do anything that would help. I’m stuck here with a fucking bullet wound and I can’t go run, or patrol, or *anything* . It sucks.”

“Yeah. I get that.” Jason leaned back in his chair with a contemplative look on his face. “What if I drove you around, though?”

“What?”

“You could sit in the bike’s sidecar and I could drive. We could stay out for a while. That way you can be outside, and moving. Plus…” Jason grinned at Tim, “If we’re going fast enough, no one can hear when you yell.”

Comprehension dawned on Tim’s face, and he nodded vigorously. “It’s true. You should try it, Dick.”

On the one hand, Dick loved the idea. He wanted to go so fucking fast that no one could even see him. If he’d had a speedster friend, he would have been blowing up their phone for a piggy-back ride. On the other…

Dick didn’t give a shit. He was mad. He was going to ride the motorcycle.

Jason waited until they were out of the city, but then he made good on his word. They sped down the deserted road at an alarming speed, enough that Dick had to put effort into staying sitting up straight.

When he’d deemed them fast enough, he’d tried yelling. True to his brothers’ word, the sound was immediately snatched by the wind. Then Dick started to scream.

Not all of it was words. Some of it was just strings of noise as loud as Dick could get, releasing the anger in his chest until his voice was hoarse. Others were words.

He yelled at Bruce. He raged, throwing every insult he could think of at a man who wasn't there. He lamented the fire. He told Bruce that Robin was *his* name. *His* . Who was he to take it? Bruce didn't deserve to be a fucking father, he screamed. Leaving kids in burning buildings or training them to fight, he never did the right thing. Dick could see now. All Bruce cared about was Batman. His only concern was fighting for Gotham. And that was fine! It was all perfectly fine! There was nothing wrong with caring about your city. That is, until you started being an obsessive prick who abandoned your family and stole kid's childhoods. Then you had a problem.

When they got home, Dick was still angry. But the heat had been turned off. He wasn't going to explode, yet.

Chapter 33: Little Bird, HEY BACK THE FUCK UP BRUCE

Chapter Notes

> The long awaited moment is finally here. The motherfucker, the shithead, the asshole himself is returning to the scene. Everyone boo for Bruce Wayne, please. Song is The Horror and the Wild by The Amazing Devil.
>
> No CW's for this chapter
>
> Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seeing as Tim could now get around on crutches, he was allowed to leave the penthouse. Jason and Dick didn't *like* him leaving the penthouse alone, especially with one leg out of commission, but they allowed it because, as Jason said, "If you don't get sunlight soon you're gonna turn transparent."

So Tim didn't like going outside. Sue him. Outside was scary.

Today, though, he had a purpose. At Gotham's History Museum, there was a section on local history. A big chunk of that section was dedicated to Arkham Asylum. When Tim still went to school, he'd gone on a field trip there and found something very interesting.

The museum displayed Arkham's blueprints. Now, most people would say that those blueprints were out of date. Those people forgot two very important things.

One: the mental health system was shit. No way Arkham got enough funding to remodel. They were lucky if they didn't have asbestos in the walls.

Two: Tim had access to the internet, and it had taken him exactly four seconds to confirm his theory. People always forgot that Tim's theories were twenty percent vibes and eighty percent grasping at straws. He was just right enough that people thought he was logical.

He was logical, but not when he was coming up with ideas.

The museum was only a ten minute walk from the penthouse, but

with his crutches Tim managed to make it twenty. He got inside, used his puny height to convince the lady selling tickets that he was ten and doing a project for school so he could get a free ticket, and hustled into the local history section.

Just as he'd expected, the blueprints were right there. Tim took several photos with his phone's camera. He made sure to get some of the text bits there too so no one would question it(even though, what were they going to question? A thirteen year old? Breaking into Arkham? More likely they'd think he was about to be admitted and pre-planning his escape. That was much for fitting for his generation.).

When he had what he needed, Tim took the time to study those informational pieces. Breaking into Arkham wasn't necessarily hard. If Jason paid off the right people, they could just walk in, kill the Joker, and walk back out without anyone lifting a finger to stop them. Unfortunately, though, Black Mask had been paying his own bribes to keep the rogues in Arkham protected. If Tim had to guess, he'd say Black Mask wanted them as an emergency backup if he ever needed to distract Batman.

So, the most effective way for Tim and his brothers to get into Arkham would be to pay the right people to let them break in and out with minimal interference.

Of course, by *them* , Tim meant Jason and Dick. His brothers had been adamant that Tim was not to go with them. One, they'd said, Tim wasn't allowed to watch murder. Two, he was already scared enough of Arkham. They didn't know how he'd react if he went inside. Tim's brain was unpredictable like that.

Tim was torn on how much he agreed with them. Jason and Dick were right. He *really* didn't want to go near Arkham. Anytime he thought about it, his chest got all tight, his head turned fuzzy, and his surroundings seemed to fall away until all Tim could see were the *what if* 's his mind conjured.

Safe to say, he wasn't interested in going anywhere near Arkham. But…

This was Jason and Dick. His brothers. The only two people who had managed to stay in his life and not call him wrong, despite being the two with the odds stacked highest against them. Tim didn't want them to go in there alone. The thought repelled him.

But if his brothers wouldn't allow it, Tim would most likely not be

able to go, no matter what he wanted. Where Tim was skilled in determination, his brothers matched him in stubbornness. They had their minds made up on this. Tim wouldn't set foot in Arkham.

He was almost finished with the exhibit. Adjusting his crutches so he could lean down for a picture of a section on Arkham's guards, that was when Tim felt it. The air shifted just barely. For half a second, the world went still as his stomach dropped in heart-clenching dread. Something was wrong, and Tim only noticed in time to realize he'd done so too late.

"Tim."

It had been over four years now since Tim had heard Bruce's voice in person, and his reaction to it now was severely different.

He remembered one time, when he was nine, Tim had had a panic attack at school. He didn't have them often, but when they showed up, they were terrible. When it hit, he'd run out of class and down the hall to the bathroom where he'd locked himself in a stall to wait it out. Once he'd acknowledged that yes, he could breathe, and no, he wasn't going to die, Tim had walked to the office. All by himself, tears still wet on his cheeks, he'd asked the secretary to let him go home.

Of course, his parents were out of town. When the secretary told him they didn't answer(Tim had known they wouldn't. They never did.), he gave her Bruce's number. Bruce had picked up on the third ring. Twenty minutes later, he was there.

When he heard Bruce's voice that day, Tim had relaxed. Relief flooded over him. Thank god there was someone here, someone who *cared* , someone who wouldn't leave Tim on his own to handle everything.

That had all been a lie. Now, hearing Bruce say his name, it was worse than when Tim's parents spoke to him. He didn't just want to hide. He wanted to run.

And, naturally, it was the one time where he couldn't. The crutches seemed to dig even harder into his underarms, emphasizing to Tim just how useless an escape attempt would be.

Not that it would be useful even if he was capable of running. Tim wasn't so arrogant as to think he could outrun Batman.

He'd frozen with his back to Bruce. If he didn't react, Bruce wouldn't go away. That wasn't how he played. Even when they were younger,

Bruce had always been an authority figure. He expected to be listened to, whether it be telling Jason to finish his math homework or making Tim go to bed. Tim couldn't get out of this alone. But he could get help.

His phone was still in his hand. With the speed only a child with a coding obsession could manage, he switched to messages and sent *no mask* to Jason. Dots appeared immediately in response, but Tim didn't have time for that. He silenced the ringer and closed the tab. Then he double clicked the side button of his watch.

The cavalry had been summoned. Of course, right now half the cavalry was out of commission with a bullet hole in his leg, but Tim still had a resurrected older brother who was always down for murder, and he was on his way. All Tim had to do was stall.

Which meant talking. Slowly, wishing every second as he did so that the man behind him would go away, Tim turned around.

Save for a few gray hairs, Bruce looked no different. Same haircut, same eyes, same frown—now Tim knew why he was always so serious. He was dressed in all black—Tim had forgotten how emo he was, holy shit—and Damian was nowhere to be seen. That didn't mean much, considering his background, but a kid could hope.

"Batman," Tim said. May as well lay it all out. Bruce knew who he was, and he should know Tim had the same cards. He chose right. Bruce's face tightened just barely. If Tim hadn't spent years analyzing every twitch of his parents' expressions to interpret their feelings, he would have missed it.

"You're hurt," Bruce said, ignoring Tim's clear disinterest.

"Yeah. Did you talk to Damian about that?"

Bruce sighed. "He's…learning. Damian isn't used to handling problems nonviolently. He doesn't have the skills yet to differentiate." So he knew. He knew, and he wasn't sorry. Tim debated using his crutch to break Bruce's leg, too.

"Did you send him after me?"

"No. That was Damian's own decision. He informed me that he was going to do reconnaissance. If I'd have known what he was going to do, I would have stopped him."

No apology, still. Good to know. Bruce didn't actually feel bad for what happened. He was doing damage control, and that meant he wanted something. "What are you doing here?" Tim asked.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Why?"

As a kid, Tim had always been talkative. At Drake Manor, he kept all his thoughts bottled up so he wouldn't ignore his parents, and when he got to the Wayne's they all spilled out, every idea and story he had. Everyone had listened to him there. They wanted to hear him speak. The short answers Tim was giving now seemed to take Bruce aback. Maybe he'd assumed that Tim still trusted him.

He shifted his weight wrong, and a stab of pain shot through his leg.

Yeah. Fat fucking chance.

"You're important to me. I wanted to check in on you, see how you're doing. Do you still like photography?"

"What do you want, Bruce?" *How much longer until Jason got here?*

For the first time, Bruce genuinely changed his expression. It had turned annoyed. Tim had always been eager to please. Jason was loyal and Dick was attached, but Tim had low self esteem. He would do anything to make anyone he deemed good happy with him. His parents, his brothers, Bruce, Alfred…

Good thing his mind didn't have Bruce in the *good* category anymore.

"You need to stop what you three are doing."

"Why?"

Because killing is wrong . "Because you can't just kill people." *Bingo* . "That's not the right way to do this. When you kill someone, you're sinking down to their level. You're allowing anger to consume you."

Okay, wow. There were a lot of things Tim could say to that. He settled on, "Didn't you already try this talk on Hood and Aegis?" Bruce might know Dick and Jason's identities, but Tim wouldn't give him the satisfaction of acknowledging it.

"I did. They wouldn't listen to me, but they might listen to you. Tim, if they continue down this path, they will lose themselves. They're

blinded by their crusade. If they keep going like this, I'll have to step in."

Tim laughed. Genuinely *laughed* . Pressing a hand to his mouth to suppress the sound, snorting and giggling, *laugh* .

"You keep saying this," he said. "Do you realize that we talk to each other? I've heard your speech, Bruce. I already made my choice. I chose them."

Bruce's frown deepened. "Like I said, Tim. If you three don't stop this, I will stop you."

"Okay." Tim shrugged. Of course, Batman threatening him was scary as hell, but that was part of his gimmick. The game was intimidation, and if Tim wanted to play, he couldn't let Bruce see his hand. "You can try. I mean, your son already did, and it wasn't that effective." It hurt like hell, but Tim knocked on his thigh. "See?"

It looked like Bruce was about to start in with another monologue, or maybe some angry eye contact that Tim would definitely break because no way was he doing eye contact right now, but at that moment, Tim's salvation arrived.

Jason appeared at the top of the stairs over Bruce's shoulder. He had on his jacket and jeans like always—it was honestly a surprise that no one had noticed his jacket was the same one Red Hood wore—, and a pair of metal-tipped combat boots. No doubt he had a whole arsenal of weapons hidden on his person. He scanned the room for a grand total of ten seconds before he saw them and sped over. Even from this distance, Tim could see a green glow emanating from his eyes.

Jason passed Bruce and put an arm around Tim's shoulder, pulling him back and behind him in one smooth movement. Shock registered in Bruce's expression before he returned to impassiveness.

"I suggest you fuck the hell off," Jason growled, expression murderous, "Before I shoot you right here."

"In front of all these people?" Bruce asked.

"I'm dead. They can't prosecute me."

"Not if they find out the body in your coffin is a fake."

"Do that, and we'll do the same to you." It wasn't an empty threat. As

part of a contingency in their plan, Jason, Tim, and Dick had been steadily compiling evidence that Bruce Wayne was not only alive, but Batman. That included Tim uncovering several bank statements supporting bribery claims, Jason going out to get pictures of him on patrol(Tim had coached him on how to stay hidden), and Dick getting in a wheelchair and going to the coroner's. They had enough to make Bruce's life very difficult.

Bruce glared. "Jason, you need to stop this."

"We've had this talk, B." Jason gave him a smile brimming with sarcasm. "I'm not stopping. None of us are. Now *fuck off* , and stop accosting my brother when he's trying to be outside."

"We're inside right now," Tim said.

"You were outside when you went up the stairs." Not mentioning whether Tim had walked or not. *Smart* . "Will you go away now, B?"

Bruce took half a step back. "This isn't over, Jason. This is just your final warning. Kill again, and I will stop you."

He walked away. Jason waited until he was out of earshot before mimicking in a comedically deep voice, " *Kill again, and I will stop you* . Dick."

"Dick's not here right now," Tim snarked.

Jason ruffled his hair. "Shut up, you gremlin of a child." Kneeling in front of Tim, he looked him over, worry only now appearing in his expression. "Are you okay, baby bird? Did he do anything?"

"Other than talk, no."

"Good. We should probably get out of here, then. I wouldn't put it past him to tell security some bullshit and get us arrested just to slow us down." Jason waited for Tim to adjust his crutches and stayed at his pace while they walked to the door. "I brought Dick's bike, so you can take the sidecar."

"Awesome."

Outside, Tim's mind decided to start playing tricks on him. Everywhere he wasn't looking became somewhere Bruce could be. Every itch became a place where he could have planted a tracker. What if this was it? What if Tim was the one to show Bruce where

they were? What if he ruined everything?

But there wasn't anything he could do about it. Jason knew what he was doing, and he took them in a long, looping drive back to the safehouse. *Safe* house. Safe House. Safe.

Tim turned the word over and over in his mind, losing his focus on anything else. The motorcycle's roar and the wind on his face helped to calm him down as he pulled it apart and reassembled it, until they got back to the penthouse.

Safe House. They were safe. As long as he was with his brothers, Tim was safe.

Chapter End Notes

WE HATE BRUCE WAYNE IN THIS FIC WE HATE HIM SO MUCH

Chapter 34: Lost Bird, Time to Cause Problems

Chapter Notes

We're having fun here :))

No CW's for this chapter

Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jason's hackles were still up when they got back to the apartment, Tim leading the way into the elevator on his crutches. He'd been quiet the whole way back, but Jason could see his eyes darting around. Tim wouldn't admit it, but he was rattled. Of course he was; anyone would be.

That fucking asshole. If they hadn't been in public, and Tim hadn't been nearby, Jason would have fought him. He wore the metal-tipped boots just in case, but outside with such a high profile person as Timothy Drake(though the odds were 50/50 that anyone would recognize him, Gala Tim and Normal Tim were completely different people), it was too risky.

Dick was on them the moment they got inside, hopping on one foot to Tim's side so fast that his momentum almost tipped him over. In the weeks since he'd been shot, the showoff had been walking around on his hands any time he wanted to go somewhere.

It was impressive, and Jason would die again before he admitted it.

"Did he do anything? Was Damian there? Did he hurt you?" Dick asked, helping Tim over to the couch despite Tim being more capable of standing than him.

"I'm fine, Dick," Tim said. Worry creased his face and he looked back at Jason like a student checking their answer. "But if Damian was there, what if he bugged me or something?"

It was a very Bruce thing to do. Knowing who they were, he'd likely assume that they'd find any device planted on their persons quickly, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try.

"That's a fair point." Jason made sure to keep his voice calm and

level. There was nothing to panic about. If Bruce knew where they were, they would just move again. “He wouldn’t be able to do anything but put one on you, so it’d be on your clothes or your skin.” Tim twitched involuntarily. “If you want, you can go to the bathroom and check for anything, then check the clothes you’re wearing really carefully. Pockets, seams, everywhere. And don’t say anything that he doesn’t already know.”

Tim nodded. “Got it.” He got up and hobbled into the bathroom next to the kitchen. While they waited for him, Jason sat on the chair across from Dick.

“What did he look like?” Dick asked. His expression was closed off, his voice guarded. Jason still understood his question, though.

Were there scars? Injuries? *Anything* to account for what Bruce had done?

“He looked fine,” Jason told him. “Some gray hair, but nothing else.”

Dick’s frown deepened. “Oh. Okay.”

Jason wished he could tell Dick that it didn’t matter. That Bruce was fucked up, and the things he’d done were even more fucked up, and of course he didn’t look impacted by it because doing bad things only weighs on you if you realize that it’s wrong. An image of the Joker appeared in his head. *Sometimes not even then* .

But he didn’t know how to say any of that out loud. So instead, he said, “He’s a shit, but we’re not going to let him take anything else from us.”

Dick’s gaze hardened. In this decision, Jason knew, all three of them were united. Call it an upscaled teen rebellion or call it self preservation. If Bruce wanted to hurt them, he’d get a bullet in the kneecap, a fist in his face, and a bo in his gut.

No one was separating Jason and his brothers ever again.

The bathroom door opened. Dick and Jason turned to see Tim coming out with his lips pressed together, a small circular device held up between his fingers.

Obviously it had been there the whole time, and obviously they could continue to talk as long as they didn’t say anything stupid, but none of them opened their mouths. There was something different about

seeing the device. It was proof that their privacy had been invaded. Not only that, but Bruce had used Tim to do it.

Anger boiled in Jason's blood. Bullets in kneecaps it was, then.

Silently—or, as silently as he could with his crutches clacking against the wooden floor every other step, Tim crossed to the room with the computer setup. Jason let Dick put his arm around his shoulders for support, and they followed him.

Tim took a seat at the desk and turned on the setup. Grabbing a pad of sticky notes and a pen, he scribbled, *trace the signal* .

Oh. Yeah, that was probably a good idea. Look at his little brother, already sabotaging Bruce back. He was going to grow up to cause bad people so much pain. Jason was already so proud.

Tim did a series of things on the computer that Jason didn't understand in the slightest. A window of code opened on the screen. Tim began scrolling through, seeking out specific lines and changing minute details. Jason and Dick exchanged glances.

Yeah, neither of them had any idea what was going on.

After a few minutes of what looked like very precise changes(and Jason could only assume so, because he'd learned basic coding and even that had been a struggle for him. He'd always been better with the analysis work where there was no one right answer, rather than 'if you make one typo nothing will work and you will cry' rigidity of code), Tim opened a web browser and typed in a set of coordinates. What came up made him sit back in his chair with a loud exhale. Jason could relate.

The coordinates landed on the exact spot where Wayne Manor was located.

It made sense. Of course Bruce's base of operations would be his house. He'd lived there when he was legally alive. Going back and forth to some remote location would have been a pain.

But, really? It had been there the whole time and none of them had seen it? Was that why Bruce always spent so much time in his office with Alfred herding the boys away?

By now, Jason had accepted that Alfred knew. The man was one: smarter than Bruce, both academically and emotionally, and two:

Bruce's guardian for the ten year of childhood he had without his parents. Jason knew firsthand how intuitive the butler was. There was no way he wouldn't have noticed his surrogate son dressing as a fucking bat and going out to fight crime. The only thing he questioned was why Alfred tolerated it.

In regards to whether Alfred had known about the fire, Jason had come to his own conclusion on that, too. The week the Manor burned down was the one week in six months Alfred had taken for vacation. Bruce had been very encouraging of his break(not that Bruce didn't normally try to convince Alfie to take breaks. All of them did. He just usually didn't care so much about the timeframe.).

Alfred wasn't their guardian, but he'd cared about the boys. To Jason, he'd been almost like a grandfather. He couldn't imagine any circumstances in which Alfred ever agreed to let Bruce do what he did.

The logical conclusion? Alfred didn't know. Why he didn't come looking for them after the fire, Jason didn't know. But he held firm that Alfred wouldn't have done this to them. The man cared too much.

With the bug having fulfilled its purpose, Jason took great satisfaction in holding it close to his mouth, saying, 'tell Damian I said he's short," before letting it fall and crushing it beneath the heel of his boot.

Ah, satisfaction.

"Well," Tim said. "I feel like there's only one thing to do now."

"Go prank him?" Dick asked.

"Sabotage him back?" Jason suggested at the same time.

Tim shrugged. "I don't see why we can't do both."

Jason grinned. Bruce saw them as adversaries, wayward children bulldozing down a path they were too proud to see the cracks in. He in no way looked at them as equals, but he certainly took them seriously. He'd forgotten that they were teenagers. Teenagers who knew exactly how much Bruce hated people touching his shit. "I think that's a great idea, baby bird."

Chapter End Notes

The CIA dude watching my computer is probably panicking cause

he saw me search 'how to find out if you've been bugged' and 'how to trace the signal from a bug device' one after the other(the second one yielded nothing so I bullshitted all of that I'm in pain that is so definitely not how that's done but I don't know how it is done but erjhfjbfjhfkhgherkhs). Anyways next chapter's gonna be fun!

Chapter 35: Lonely Bird, Tim to Cause Problems

Chapter Notes

> We're having some fun today! And by fun I mean actual fun because Bruce is about to get the shit pranked out of him and I took great joy from writing it.
>
> No CW's for this chapter
>
> Enjoy! :)

Two motorcycles roared up the quarter-mile long driveway to Wayne Manor under cover of darkness(translation—cover of them waiting for a Batman sighting in the city to confirm that he was gone). A waxing moon shone down on them, illuminating the way with faint light.

Tim, like always, had chosen to ride on the back of Jason's bike. That left Dick's sidecar free to fill with all the shit they'd gotten for their visit. Silly String, Ritz crackers, gum, mass amounts of toilet paper…

Bruce ruined their childhoods, so they'd decided to lean into the whole childish thing with a vengeance.

The entrance to Bruce's hideout could be anywhere on the grounds. With all the vehicles Batman used, it would have to be big enough to fit. But Jason, Dick, and Tim had figured that there had to be an entrance to the cave somewhere in the Manor as well.

Dismounting the bikes, the three of them began up the steps to the burned shell of the house. All three wore dark clothes and dominos, just to be sure that their faces wouldn't be caught on camera. They looked incredibly angsty. It was hilarious.

Dick did his best to breathe through his mouth. Every time he used his nose, the smell of burned wood filled his nostrils, and nausea flooded his sense. He wished they'd thought to bring face masks. Though he couldn't see their eyes through the dominos' lenses, Tim's face was carefully empty, and Jason's was creased with concentration. They felt it too.

The doors had come off their hinges by the time the fire had been put out, so the three of them walked inside with no trouble.

The Manor's interior was rotting and ash filled. Up near the top of the stairs, a section of the roof had caved in, exposing the inside to the elements. All the carpets, easy fuel for the fire, had been destroyed, leaving twisted, cracked, and burned wood behind. A musty, wet smell permeated the air, mixed with the harsh sting of smoke holding onto the wood. Dick forced himself to stay calm. It was late July, and the air was warm, but it was normal. It didn't sear Dick's skin. There was no fire here, not anymore. It was safe.

Tim grabbed his hand. Surprised, Dick looked over. Tim had been between him and Jason, and now, he held both their hands, gaze fixed determinedly ahead. Where his and Jason's hands were connected, Jason's knuckles were white. Dick squeezed Tim's hand reassuringly. They were all nervous. It would be fine.

When they'd been kids, Jason pointed out, Bruce had spent a lot of time in his study. At certain times in particular, Alfred would make sure none of them went inside. If there was an entrance to the hideout, it would be in there.

They passed beneath the stairs and to the left. The door to the study was down the hall, lined with crumbling wallpaper and debris. The brothers picked their way around loose wood and bits of drywall as they made their way towards the(miraculously intact) door.

On second thought, if this was where the entrance to the hideout was, maybe it wasn't such a miracle after all.

Jason opened the door and led the way inside. The study had sustained barely any damage from the fire. There was some, enough to keep anyone looking around from getting suspicious, but overall, the room was fine. The books were mostly destroyed, and the carpet was clogged with ash, but the desk and other furniture was fine.

"He did a really shitty job of covering his tracks," Jason remarked. Dick had given up trying to make him censor himself, especially after Tim had started swearing too. The influencing was already done.

"We still don't know where the entrance is," Tim said.

"Well, obviously. If we could see where it is now, we'd have been able to see it when we were kids. Let's *look* ."

They spread out. Jason began searching the bookshelf, not just for an entrance, but for any books that may be salvageable. Tim went to the desk, methodically going over everything in the drawers, while Dick

checked the walls and nearby furniture for anything out of the ordinary.

He found what he was looking for in the grandfather clock.

Most of the room showed at least some sign of fire damage, no matter how insignificant. The clock, however, was perfectly preserved. It didn't work—but then, it had never worked. Bruce had told them it was just for decoration—, but aside from the dust settled over it, it looked the same as it had the day before the fire.

"Guys," Dick said. "Maybe this?"

Tim appeared at his side, Jason walking over more slowly. Tim began examining the clock himself, checking the back and moving the pendulum. "You're probably right," he said. "These clocks are usually symmetrical. There's a few at Drake Manor like it. The back of this one's totally flat, though. And flush with the wall. I'm not exactly strong—" A lie. Tim was skinny, but built with pure muscle. He could carry just as much as Dick, though neither of them were quite as strong as Jason. "—, but I'd normally be able to shift it some. It's attached to the wall."

"Good job, baby bird," Jason praised.

"Thanks. We still don't know how to get in, though." Frowning, Tim contemplated the clock. Jason and Dick copied him.

The pendulum might need to be moved a certain direction. Or maybe there was some kind of button or switch inside the clock? Dick stared at the clock, trying to let his mind loosen. If he could let his subconscious work…

There. The clock face. The longer Dick looked at it, the more it reminded him of a combination lock like on lockers at school. The clock face wouldn't turn. But the hands…

Stepping forward, Dick opened the little glass door covering the clock. Slowly and gently, he began to wind the minute hand, looking for a noise, a click, anything.

"There," Tim said.

Dick froze. "Did you see something?"

"Didn't you hear the click?" Dick hadn't. He said this, and Tim

frowned in confusion. “I swear there was a click. It wasn’t loud or anything, but I heard it.”

The clock’s hands were pointing to 10:48. Dick carefully let go, taking half a step back. “Maybe you were right, baby bird. Let’s see.”

He’d barely gotten the words out before there was an almost silent hiss of hydraulics. Dick stumbled back a few steps farther as the clock was pushed a few inches away from the wall, then moved to the side. Behind it was a set of stone stairs leading down. *Way to go, edgelord* , Dick thought.

“Honestly, I thought it’d be harder,” Jason said. Dick had to agree. He’d been ready to spend hours combing the Manor, searching for the smallest hint of anything amiss. Bruce had apparently done a much worse job than anyone thought covering his tracks.

No one seemed to want to go down the stairs first. They all knew what was at the bottom—a vigilante’s hideout. But with the entrance the way it was, and the sky dark outside, and the bottom out of sight because the stair curved into a spiral, it was difficult not to imagine a million scary things down there.

Because he was the oldest brother, Dick steeled himself, grabbed his brothers’ hands, and stepped forward. He might need to lead the way, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t ask for support while he did it.

Tim and Jason followed him down the steps. They had to let go of each other in exchange for the railing, because the stairs were so steep that Dick found himself leaning back a little to counteract his own mind telling him he was about to tip forward(despite that, part of him still wanted to hop on the railing and slide to the bottom. Maybe next time). After nearly a full minute’s descent, they found the hideout.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Dick said. “Did he really make a fucking *Batcave* ?”

The stairs opened into a huge natural cavern, lit only halfway to the top. Above the lights, swarms of bats flew around. Dick worried for Bruce’s sanity. Maybe he thought he was actually a bat.

(Maybe he’d try to hug one and get bitten, then have to get rabies shots. That’d be funny.)

There was a training area even bigger than the one at the warehouse, stocked with nonlethal weapons. In the center of the cave, a control

center with nine monitors and ass loads of equipment stood on a slightly raised pedestal, wires from the electronics feeding into the ground. Tim was staring at it, looking a little in love. Across from them, though, was the most important—at least at this current moment. A large door, still open. Jackpot.

“We should go get our stuff,” Dick said. The plan had been to find the vehicle's entrances and bring their bikes in through there.

“We should steal his tires,” Jason muttered as they walked to the opening, staring at a wall of spare tires. Dick and Tim laughed.

It took ten minutes to find their bikes again. Once they did, the brothers drove over the lawn and onto the small road leading away from the Manor. Most likely, it doubled back towards Gotham at some point farther down.

When they’d gotten inside and parked, the three of them got to work.

First were their own surveillance devices. Small cameras and bugs in every nook and cranny. Jason had gone out last night, hitting up every single person he knew who sold devices like that, and bought out their entire stock. It was a more creepy version of the alarm prank—or, it would be, if they weren’t vigilantes. Would Bruce find them? Absolutely. It wasn’t so much about surveilling him as it was getting back at him for trying to bug Tim. Though, with the sheer amount they were planting, they might be able to get some use out of it.

It’s spy glitter , Dick thought, holding in a snort of laughter. *He’ll think he’s found it all, but every so often he’ll glance at a spot and there’ll be another one.*

After that, the real fun started. Part of Dick wanted to just destroy the cave. Break the monitors, slash the tires, and steal the weapons. Ruin Bruce’s system. But, he reasoned with himself, what they were doing was ultimately funnier.

Jason and Dick ran around with silly string, covering every surface possible. The training mats, the computers, the chairs— *everything* .

Tim went through with glitter. Dick had thought the bug would be bad, but they had the real thing, too. It was bright blue, because Dick had bought it and blue was his favorite color. He covered the floor and focused especially on the training mats, where a broom would sweep up most of it but push some in deeper to the foam for Bruce and Damian to find later. The kid was nowhere to be found—Dick

assumed he was shadowing Bruce, seeing as he hadn't shown up on the news at all.

Once he'd emptied all ten jars of glitter, Tim got out the crackers. He crushed them with a hammer in a collection of utility supplies in the corner. Then, with an expression of unbridled glee, he emptied every package of crumbs over Bruce's keyboard. Now Dick understood why he'd been so adamant that they buy them. He'd thought Tim was just hungry.

When that was done, the three of them got out the toilet paper—twelve rolls. They threw it everywhere, laughter echoing off the cave's walls as they jumped and ran around, throwing the paper like streamers over everything. The computers and the massive bat insignia on the wall got the most attention—Dick wished they'd brought spray paint to deface the bat. Bruce had really gotten attached to his brand.

Finally, the cave looked thoroughly destroyed. Jason did in fact steal the tires. They couldn't get them all, but by tying them together with some paracord from the supplies storage, they managed to stack ten of them in Dick's sidecar, creating a tower that leaned precariously.

Maybe it was a bad idea to drive home with this. But when he saw the childish excitement on Jason's face, Dick couldn't say no.

They rode back over the grass to the main driveway, tires in the sidecar and Tim clinging to Jason's waist. All three of them were grinning the whole way back to the safehouse. Bruce definitely knew where they were by now, so any trace he did on the bugs would be useless. He got nothing from their sabotage, and the brothers got a kick out of pissing him off. Worth it, in Dick's opinion. They'd finally done something Bruce wouldn't see coming.

Chapter 36: Little Bird, Should We be Worried

Chapter Notes

> For the record, I did not see this going the way it did. I started writing, and then my brain went 'hey what if this happened', and then it kept doing that but getting progressively darker and here we are so yeah.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: death, graphic descriptions of violence
>
> Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

So apparently the night they broke into the Batcave(the name had stuck after Dick said it) was the same night Damian debuted as… Batman's sidekick. They'd gotten back to the penthouse in the early hours of the morning and checked the news to make sure they hadn't missed anything huge. Damian had been front and center in all his traffic light glory, fighting next to Batman with a viciousness that surprised Tim. Not that Damian was capable of doing it—the cuts on Tim's leg and throat had scarred—, but that Bruce was allowing it. Bit hypocritical, if you asked him.

It had been Dick's first time seeing the kid in person. He'd gone totally still, expression blank while he watched the kid on screen, jumping and dodging and swinging his katanas like a tiny death machine. Then he'd gone to the roofs.

Now, two weeks later, with Dick's leg healed enough that he refused to let Jason and Tim force him off duty, Aegis and Red Hood were out on patrol once again, traversing one of their usual routes through Crime Alley. Tim was on comms as Specter, a plate of scrambled eggs and grapes next to him. On the monitor, he could see the city rushing past in a shaky landscape as Dick leapt from roof to roof. At the moment, both of his brothers' lens feeds were identical, so Tim had Jason's view minimized. They were nearing the center of the Alley with no disturbances higher profile than a mugging.

In the weeks since they'd invaded the Batcave, Batman had been paying significantly more attention to Crime Alley than he had in the past. Most likely, he was trying to keep an eye on Dick and Jason.

Because, you know, it wasn't like Crime Alley was one of the most dangerous places in Gotham and could use Batman's help.

No, Batman's time was definitely best spent following the kids he abandoned to make sure they do what he said. Mhm.

Tim pulled up the hood on the Flying Graysons sweatshirt, fixing it to keep his hair from falling in his eyes. He really needed to get it cut. He'd also been thinking about dying the tips of his hair the way Dick had, though he didn't want to make them blue. Maybe red. Red would be cool.

"Anything, Spec?" Jason asked.

Tim clicked through the newsfeeds, the police scanner, and their bank of hacked cameras. "Nothing. Maybe tonight's just quiet."

"Bet you ten bucks something really bad pops up in two minutes," Dick said, grinning as he flipped over a gap, adding a few back handsprings for good measure on his way across the roof.

He was wrong. It took three. "Hood, Aegis, the cameras by the corner store on Maple Street caught a car using a stolen license plate being driven into the loading dock of a building across the street. I'll send the directions to your lenses."

The building was almost directly across from the camera he'd used to find it, and Tim kept watch on the building for the ten minutes it took Jason and Dick to get there. No one went in or out, which, even though it was almost midnight, was suspicious. In Gotham, people were working at all hours of the day and night. Not necessarily the same people, but some people.

Tim jotted down the building's address and did a quick internet search. The building was condemned. Was this odd? No. Or at least, it wouldn't be, if it hadn't been condemned for two years and still appeared to be in good condition.

"Just to let you know, this might be part of a big thing," Tim said as he dug deeper. "This place looks like a front. I don't know what for yet, though."

"Thanks, Spec. We'll be careful," Jason said. On Dick's lens, the building came into sight. Tim quickly pulled Jason's feed back up as well and divided one of the monitors between them, then went back to looking through everything he could find about the 'Caribbean

Economic Front Headquarters'. Despite being condemned and deemed unsafe for habitation, the building was having its utilities paid through an offshore bank account in Haiti.

Something weird was happening. Tim's gut felt was twisting the way it did when he had both headphones on and his parents were coming up the stairs. He couldn't see it, but his body was picking up on hundreds of little stimuli that made his brain whisper *wrong wrong wrong* .

"Guys, be really careful in there," Tim said, unease bleeding into his tone. "Something feels off here."

"Do you see anything?" Dick asked. He'd gone from the joking mood he'd had earlier to dead seriousness, focusing on the task at hand.

"Nothing to help you going in, but the building's being paid for by an account in Haiti, and it's apparently been condemned for a few years. Someone's been using it for a while, and neither us nor Batman have noticed."

"Got it," Jason said. The two of them were perched on the roof of the corner store, waiting for Tim's go ahead. "Anything on the car?"

" *Shit* ." Tim had forgotten all about it in his hunt for information on the building. He quickly ran the plate through the DMV's registry. "It belonged to a guy in New York. Nothing special about him, from what I can see, which would make sense if these guys want to stay under the radar. He's probably not connected to anything."

"Alright. You think we should go in?" Jason asked.

No. Tim's instincts were screaming at him, but he couldn't figure out if they were telling him to send his brothers in or get them away. But if they left, people could get hurt. "Yeah. Go through one of the windows."

The building only started having windows somewhere around the tenth story. It was an odd design choice for an urban building, in Tim's opinion. Then again, he wasn't an architect. People could build their things how they wanted.

Jason and Dick grappled over to the building next to the one they were going for. Dick gleefully did some bendy acrobat shit that ended with an open window and him inside, beckoning Jason forward.

Jason jumped through, rolling to his feet inside. He came up with one gun unholstered, safety clicking off.

Inside, the building looked almost like a movie set. Everything was too perfect, and it was completely empty of people. Of course, no one was working. The building was condemned. But there should have been some signs of life. Instead, the room seemed to fill the entire floor, filled with rows of desks with one chair and computer each. Everything was the same. No personal effects, nothing out of place. It was too pristine, and it made Tim's skin crawl.

In the corners and at a few intervals along the wall, there was a security camera, red light blinking. *Fuck* . Tim let out a frustrated noise. He should have noticed. Anyone watching would know they were there now.

"You need to move fast," he said. "They'll know you're here if they're watching."

"Got it," Dick murmured. He and Jason went for the stairs while Tim began furiously looking for the building's security system and began hacking in, planning to set the cameras on loop and wipe the footage. If there was a camera in the room where someone was monitoring the footage, he could check if anyone had been watching.

He finally broke through and did what he needed. Surprisingly, when he checked the camera in the security room, he found it empty.

Wrong , his mind shrieked at him as Tim quickly scrubbed the footage. What if he'd made the wrong decision? What if his brothers were walking into a death trap? It'd be all Tim's fault.

"Spec, you okay?" Jason murmured. Tim realized that his breathing had grown ragged, loud enough for Jason to hear, apparently. He forced himself to take deep breaths.

"Yeah. Fine. Just nervous. Something feels wrong."

"Yeah, I feel it too." Dick nodded his agreement to Jason's statement. "If it gets bad we'll get out, Spec. Don't worry."

"I know," Tim said. He reached for a fidget cube on the desk and began flipping the switch back and forth. It was okay. It was fine.

The stairs stopped at the eleventh floor from the bottom, one floor above where the windows started. The rooms all the way down had

been the same creepily perfect set, lined with cameras and dark. On the other side of this one from the stairs was an elevator.

“I’m gonna go out on a limb and say we don’t go down the creepy elevator,” Jason said.

“You know, I was thinking the same,” Dick said.

That left them with the question of how to get down to the next floor. Fortunately, there was another ring of windows beneath them. Dick, with his freaky ability to climb around on things like a fucking monkey, climbed out the window and balanced on a tiny ledge while holding onto the eleventh floor windowsill with one arm while he maneuvered the tenth floor window open. Lucky for them, it was unlocked. The building’s owners probably figured that no one would be dumb enough to climb ten stories just to break in. Clearly, the building’s owners hadn’t met Dick. Tim had a feeling that the building’s owners may soon be meeting Dick.

Dick slipped through the window onto a small catwalk. Through his lens, Tim saw the remaining ten floors of the building were actually hollow, creating a massive space broken up by support beams and pillars.

“They really go to some lengths to do shady shit in warehouses these days, don’t they?” Tim muttered. Dick snorted.

Coming in behind Dick, Jason stared at the space below them. At the bottom, in a dimly lit section of the space, four figures were gathered. Three were standing and one was sitting. From their distance, Tim couldn’t make out much.

“Let’s get closer,” Jason murmured. Dick nodded, and together, they began creeping along the catwalk. It was part of a multi-leveled system, which the two of them descended. As they got closer, the situation became much clearer.

The sitting person was a man. He was zip-tied to the chair and gagged. Between the three standing men, a camera was set up on a tripod.

“Shit,” Tim whispered on behalf of his brothers. At this point, they were too close to say anything without giving away their position.

The three watched as the tallest man pulled a mask over his face and walked to stand behind the man, who reacted by crying harder and

trying to scoot away. In response, his captor put a hand on his shoulder to keep him in place.

One of his friends stepped up to the camera. Silently, he held up three fingers and counted down before pressing a button. The camera's light lit up. The man wearing the mask began to speak in a voice thick with a Creole accent.

"This message will be sent to the Gotham Police Department," he said. Tears streamed silently down the captive man's face. Something about him was familiar. Tim squinted, trying to figure it out. Had he met him before?

"We have taken the heads of Drake Industries, Jack and Janet Drake."

Tim's world froze.

His parents were on a dig. They were fine. There had been updates in the news! Except…Tim hadn't been checking the news for nearly a month now, at least not for news of his parents. The joy of having his brothers back had caused them to fade into the back of Tim's mind, only to crop up when he lay in bed trying to sleep.

He hadn't been paying enough attention. If he'd been watching the news, he would have noticed. He could have told the police something was wrong. They could have done something!

Tim recognized the man, now. He didn't know his name. He didn't know most of his parents' friends' names, because they never came to the Manor. But he was one of the people they talked about things other than business with at the galas. His laugh had been a little bit less plastic than the others. Tim hadn't minded him.

And now…they were going to kill him, weren't they?

He had to tell Dick and Jason. They could interfere if he told them. Right now, they were just as frozen as him by the mention of Tim's parents. Tim had to snap them out of it. But words wouldn't form. When he opened his mouth, nothing came out.

"And to show you we mean every word we just said…" The man had been talking. Tim hadn't registered any of it. Dammit, that could have been *useful* ! He was fucking up, again and again, and this was the one time it really, truly, mattered. But Tim was being useless. He was getting everything wrong, just like his parents said.

They were right about him, and now it was going to cost them their lives.

The man retrieved a long, serrated knife from his belt. His captive, the Drake's friend, let out a muffled scream and tried in vain to get away as the blade was brought to his throat. In his shock, Tim didn't think to look away. The knife was dragged slowly across the man's throat, a wet squelching noise echoing as flesh tore and blood spurted from the pressure. With a series of gurgling screams, the Drake's friend began to shake and convulse.

When the knife was finally removed from his throat and the blood was pouring in a thick stream down his neck, staining the man's clothes and pooling to the ground, he slumped forward, twitching grotesquely as his life drained.

The man who'd just slit his throat stepped back, sheathing the knife. He waited for his victim to stop twitching before he continued.

"As we said: we mean every word," he repeated, and Tim swore he could hear the smile in his voice. "Information will be sent to you in twelve hours for the payment. From then, you will have three days. Do not be late. Do not test us. We will be waiting."

The camera's light went off. Tim's stomach turned. The man walked straight past the corpse and went to look at the footage as it was replayed.

They laughed at something on the screen. Barely noticing, Tim let out a choked whimper. That spurred his brothers into action.

Dick and Jason dropped from the catwalk, Dick using a grapple to break his fall and Jason just jumping. With the element of surprise on their side, they attacked the three men.

"Close your eyes, Specter," Jason warned. Robotically, Tim did as he was told. Three gunshots went off. When Tim looked again, all three men were on the ground, blood pooling. Dick was on his knees by the Drake's friend, one hand by his neck. For a few seconds, they waited. Then Dick looked up, shaking his head. Tim had figured. No one would survive losing that much blood. The scar on his neck seemed to tighten, constricting his airway.

"We need to find them," Dick said. No one asked who he was talking about.

“Yeah,” Tim said faintly. “You do that.”

He cut the comm link, still reeling. Without processing anything, he sent off an alert to the police so they could find the bodies. Then he got up, took two steps towards the trash can, and fell to his knees, violently throwing up.

Chapter End Notes

> THE AMOUNT OF RESEARCH I DID WHILE WRITING THIS CHAPTER TO TRY AND FIGURE OUT ALL THE CANON

Chapter 37: Lost Bird, Stop Traumatizing the Children

Chapter Notes

> Hahahaha well that happened anyway NEW CHAPTER!!!! And this one's kinda fluffy!! There's nothing about to go wrong!!!!
>
> Content Warning's for this chapter: mentions of drug overdose, mentioned substance abuse
>
> Enjoy! :)

There was puke all over the floor in the monitor room when they got back. Tim was hunched over in the corner, knees hugged to his chest. He'd been crying, but the tears had stopped falling, leaving his face red and puffy. He looked too small, and too young, and like he didn't deserve any of this.

Jason remembered finding his own mom's body. She'd been in the bathroom. At first, Jason had thought she was sleeping, exhausted from stress. Then he saw the needle on the ground.

She'd been so cold when he shook her shoulders, yelling for her to wake up. Now, Jason knew that it was a bad idea to shake anyone who was unconscious—or in general—but in that moment, all he'd cared about was the fact that his mom wasn't awake.

He remembered trying to find her pulse with only the knowledge he'd gotten from TV shows. Clumsy fingers had felt along her neck, searching for a sign of life, any sign that he wasn't alone. He never found it.

Jason had sat like Tim was now, back pressed against the porcelain of the bathtub. All his thoughts had been dulled to a near silent hum. It took nearly three hours for him to remember he should call the police. Before they arrived, he'd gotten his things and left. There was no way he'd be letting them put him in the foster system.

That had led to living on the streets, which had led to him being kidnapped, which led to…everything else.

Jason and Dick were at Tim's side in an instant. They pulled him into a hug, and he responded with a fierce grip, pressing his face into Jason's shoulder. He was shaking.

For a few minutes, they stayed like that. Then Dick reluctantly extricated himself from the hug. Tim just moved to cling onto Jason tighter.

"Baby bird, it's gonna be alright," Dick murmured. "I promise. We'll get them back."

Part of Jason agreed wholeheartedly. Seeing Tim like this was gut-wrenching. Jason knew he'd do anything to make him happy again, or at least whatever place he was at before that goddamn ransom.

The other part of him, the part that raged day and night at the Drakes for abandoning their son, wanted to leave the Drakes to their fate. *They deserve it* , that part whispered. It sounded suspiciously like the Pit. *This is their punishment* . The Drakes were horrible to Tim. Every time he thought about how they treated him, Jason's vision went green. He wanted them dead, or at the very least, gone. Those shitty excuses for parents should never be allowed near Tim again.

But that wasn't how it worked. Tim was his brother, and even if he wasn't, Jason was a hero. He helped people. So he would save the Drakes.

After making sure Tim was okay.

"Jason, why don't you get some food or something?" Dick asked. "I'm going to clean up here a little bit." The vomit was emitting a sour, putrid odor that filled the room. Jason forced himself not to wrinkle his nose.

"Sounds good, Ro—Robin." It was the first time he'd used the nickname since Damian told them what Bruce had done. Jason faltered as the word passed his lips. Dick stiffened, face tightening, but said nothing.

Jason picked Tim up. His little brother wrapped his arms and legs around him like a koala as Jason carried him to the living room. He sat him down in the living room and went to the kitchen. They needed something to eat.

When they were younger, there was one specific meal Tim liked to eat that Jason cooked. He had the same food preferences as he had all his life, and it had become routine for them to eat it on Saturdays. That day, Jason was allowed to shoo *Alfred* out of the kitchen.

(That was a lie. The kitchen was Alfred's domain. He temporarily loaned it to Jason as the child most trusted with the oven and the only one begging Alfie to teach him to cook. Jason didn't shoo him anywhere.)

It wasn't a complicated meal. All Tim's safe foods were relatively simple things, and not a lot of them went together. But Tim loved it, which was all that mattered to Jason.

He got some hotdogs from the fridge. When he turned around, Jason found Tim standing behind him, expression blank.

"Baby bird?" Jason asked. "Do you need something?"

Tim shook his head. Instead, he just reached out and grabbed Jason's hand. No words right now, then. Jason could work with that.

"Do you want to keep holding my hand?" Tim nodded. "Okay. I'm making us some food, but you can hold my hand while I do it. I'm making that one meal you used to like that we ate on Saturdays. Remember?"

Tim perked up a little, nodding again. Jason smiled softly.

He cut up the hotdogs and put them in a pan with some oil to cook, adding a random pick of seasonings he knew worked well together. Tim kept close to his side while he worked, holding his hand the whole time. When Jason needed to get tortillas down, Tim moved with him. It was like having a shadow.

Peeling oranges one handed was a challenge, but Jason handled it. He almost threw a knife across the room at one point, but he handled it. Setting coffee to brew was easier.

Once the hotdogs were done cooking, Jason wrapped the pieces in tortillas with some ketchup. Next to them on the plate, he put peanut butter crackers and orange slices. Simple, but Tim loved it.

He got them both mugs of coffee. With one hand each occupied, they had to make two trips to carry it all to the couch, but they managed. Once they'd sat down, Tim let go of Jason's hand and leaned into his

side, balancing his plate on his knees. They'd left Dick's plate over on the counter, where he found it ten minutes later, after cleaning up the monitor room.

Dick sat on the other side of Tim, and the brothers began to eat. The food was nostalgic, bringing memories rushing back to Jason.

He missed Saturday's with everyone. In the dining room at the Manor where no one ever really bothered with the etiquette most of high society swore was necessary. Elbows propped on tables and utensils wherever they ended up, sunlight streaming through the windows while they ate.

"Is it good?" Jason would ask, every time. His voice had been high, practically squeaky. The question could have been answered by anyone at the table, but really, it was directed towards Tim, who would be eating slowly,savoring every bite.

Tim would look up from his plate and give Jason a bright smile that could rival the sun coming through the windows. "It's awesome! Thanks, Jay." Then he'd duck his head and go back to eating.

Jason had finished his hotdog-tortilla. "Is it good?" he asked tentatively.

Tim nodded, looking up briefly from his food to give Jason a tiny smile. A warm glow of happiness filled Jason's chest. Tim still liked it. Tim could still smile.

None of them talked about what they'd seen earlier that night. Jason and Dick knew it wouldn't do anything good for Tim. When they'd finished the food and had their coffee in mugs, the three of them re-settled on the couch and turned on a movie.

"Hey, Timmy, if I go through the movie titles, can you point when I land on one you want?" Dick asked. Tim nodded. He began scrolling through movies. *Up* (Tim didn't pick it, but a solid option in Jason's opinion), *How to Train Your Dragon* (let's stay out of the movies with bad parental relationships, Jason thought), *Captain America* (maybe violence isn't the best option). Tim stopped him at *Murder on the Orient Express* .

Well, it could be worse, Jason thought. *It could be All the Bright Places* .

Tim was halfway on Jason's lap, head leaning against his chest. Jason absentmindedly ran his fingers through Tim's hair as the movie

played. Eventually, he noticed his little brother's breathing even out. Glancing down, he saw that Tim had fallen asleep.

Wow. He must have been *really* emotionally drained. Jason hadn't even switched his coffee for decaf.

Apparently, Jason was emotionally drained, too. Just as the movie was nearing its most exciting part, he drifted off. Sleep that night was still full of nightmares. Somehow, though, it felt almost safe.

Chapter 38: Lonely Bird, Hoe Don't Do It--Oh My God He Did It

Chapter Notes

:))

No CW's for this chapter

Enjoy! :)

They didn’t so much talk about saving the Drakes as they did simply start *planning* . In hindsight, it would have been useful to question those guys from the warehouse. Their fate had been sealed the moment Jason heard them, though. As much as they both hated Tim’s parents, neither of them would let anyone get away with hurting Tim, even indirectly.

Tim was going through Drake Industries’ network, searching for any scrap of information about his parents’ last trip. It had been almost four days since they’d found the warehouse, and Tim had only receded further into himself. He spoke less and forgot to shower and take care of himself even when Dick and Jason reminded him to. Dick was also pretty sure that he hadn’t slept. Every time he stood up, he swayed slightly, eyelids drooping. If Dick didn’t know from first hand experience that forcing Tim to go to bed would only end with him staring at the ceiling for twelve hours, he would have tried it.

As it was, Dick was just trying to keep Tim alive. It was difficult enough to get him to look up from his work long enough to drink some water.

Jason, for his part, was out every night going through all his contacts, asking for any information about the Drakes. No one had given him anything yet.

And Dick…Dick worried. He worried, and he ran comms for Jason because Tim was too focused on his research, and he kept an eye on Tim because even though he was focused on the research and there was no alcohol in the apartment, he wasn’t sure if Tim would find a way to get some.

As for the worrying…

Bruce had said at the museum that it was his last warning. Jason had relayed the entire conversation to Dick using a series of cartoonishly inaccurate imitations. While he did that, Dick had tried to ignore the increasing worry in his gut. Bruce wasn't one to give warnings lightly. He meant what he said. And Dick had a feeling that Batman wouldn't care how fucked up those guys had been. They were dead by Jason's hand. He would come after them now.

All they could do would be to wait for the hammer to fall.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and Dick and Jason had just finished increasing security around the penthouse(again). No one could enter through any of the windows, or even go in the parking lot without the brothers knowing. Batman and his shadow-traversing ass wouldn't be able to get inside.

Without the distraction of working on the system, Dick was back to worrying. Worrying about Bruce, worrying about the Drakes, and, mostly, worrying about Tim.

"Hey, baby bird," he said gently, coming up behind Tim. Jason was in the monitor room, engrossed in last night's recording from his lens. Peering over Tim's shoulder, Dick found the screen dominated by a window of code. Tim was probably doing less than legal things, then. Hopefully it got him some information. "How's it going?"

Tim didn't answer. It wasn't the nonverbal type of no answer, but the so-caught-up-in-work-that-he's-dead-to-the-world. Dick sighed. He reached out and tapped Tim's shoulder. Tim jumped, then turned to him. "What?"

"How's it going?"

"There's nothing useful," Tim grumbled, turning back to his laptop. "They went to Turkey, landed in Istanbul, got halfway to the dig site, and vanished. Gone. No records, no police reports, nothing. Not even a coverup."

"Jesus."

"Yeah." Tim put his head on the desk, shoulders slumped. "I can't find anything. I'm supposed to be able to find something. There's always something on the Internet. Nothing gets fully erased, and these people wouldn't be able to communicate effectively across oceans without technology."

“Maybe you should take a break,” Dick suggested. “You haven’t been outside in days.” *A good brother wouldn’t have allowed that* , his mind said. *A good brother would have made him sleep.*

His mind was right, of course, but Dick didn’t have the energy to fight with it. He had no idea what he was doing. Alone, he was running on stress and coffee supplemented by the need to stop the only member of their trio who still had two living parents from losing them.

Tim frowned. “I don’t need a break. I need to find them.”

“If you don’t give yourself time to rest, you won’t be able to work as well. Come on, just a short walk? I’ll go with you.”

“I don’t want to,” Tim said more forcefully. Hunching his shoulders, he turned back to the laptop in a very obvious dismissal. Dick wanted to scream.

He needed to help Tim. In the now? Getting his parents back was the obvious choice, and there was no way Tim would be left out of that. But in the long term? Tim would waste away at his desk, trying to help his parents, if Dick didn’t do something.

“Timmy, I’m serious. You’ve got to take a break.”

“So is this a suggestion, or are you telling me?” Tim’s voice had gone cold. He’d started working again, fingers flying over the keyboard while he multitasked. “Just tell me what you want, Dick.”

“I want you to get some fresh air,” Dick said. “You can’t just search twenty four seven until you find them!”

“We’ve all been doing that.”

“No, we haven’t. Jason sleeps when he gets home from patrol if there’s nothing. I go run to get out of the house. You’ve stuck yourself here. Baby bird, I’m sorry, but you just need to step back. Not for long. Just half an hour. That’s all I’m asking.”

“How can you do that?” Tim demanded, standing up. His clothes were wrinkled and dotted with coffee stains. “How can you ask me to stop looking? They’re my *parents* , Dick! I can’t lose them!”

“They’re shitty excuses for parents, and you know it!” And oh, that was the wrong thing to say. Dick hadn’t meant to. No matter how much he believed it himself, Tim loved his parents. Badmouthing

them wouldn't do anything helpful.

Tim's mouth clicked shut. His face wiped itself clean of all emotion, putting up a wall that Dick could practically see. Instant regret shot through him.

"I like to think they'd care if I was stuck in a burning building," Tim said softly.

Dick's mouth opened and closed, trying to come up with a response even as he struggled to find his breath.

"That's not fair," he muttered. Regret flickered through Tim's eyes, only to be erased a second later.

"Sorry," he said shortly. Closing his laptop, he stood quickly. "I'll go for that walk now."

"Tim, wait a minute—" Dick tried, but his baby brother was in the elevator, doors closing before Dick could even finish his sentence. Then he was gone. Dick dropped his head into his hands. "Goddammit."

He needed to go after Tim. Apologize. Fix it. But Dick's limbs were suddenly so, so heavy. He sat on the floor where he was and leaned against the desk. It would be so easy to just give up. He could stay and wait for Tim to come back.

But Bruce was out there. Tim was vulnerable. He wasn't thinking clearly, and no one was at their best with no sleep. Right now, he was an easy target.

But…Dick was so tired. Lead was in his limbs and fog was in his mind, and it was dragging him down, down, down…

Jason poked his head out of the monitor room. "Robin? What's going on? Where's Tim?"

"He left," Dick said. The nickname barely registered. "I made him mad."

Jason pressed his lips together in a silent *oh shit* . "What happened?"

"I told him his parents were shit."

"Oh. That'll do it."

Taking his earbud out, Jason went to sit next to Dick, leaning against his side. “Listen. We all run away sometimes. What do you expect? We’ve all got issues. Tim just needs some time. He’ll walk, let out some energy, think, and come back when he’s ready. He loves you, Dick. I promise you haven’t broken anything that can’t be fixed.”

He was right. Jason and Dick had certainly bolted their fair share of times. Tim deserved to get some space. But couldn't he have done that in his room, where he was safe?

“What about Bruce?” Dick asked.

“Don’t even worry about him.” Jason playfully nudged Dick’s shoulder. “He’s basically nocturnal now. It’s the middle of the afternoon. No way he’s out right now, and even if he was, how would he know where Tim was? He hasn’t got a tracker on him.”

And…Jason was right. There was no way for Bruce to know exactly where Tim was. There was no way for him to know they’d had an argument. A few cameras were still in the cave from their prank night. As far as they could see, Bruce wasn’t planning anything, either.

His schedule was actually…oddly regular. Arriving before patrol as the sun was setting, training with Damian in the afternoons…It was predictable. For some reason, it made Dick more uneasy than it should have.

“I guess you’re right,” Dick said. “We’ll give him a few hours.”

“Perfect.” Jason pushed himself to standing and stretched before offering a hand to Dick. “Now. Want coffee?”

Dick accepted the hand and allowed himself to be hauled to his feet. “Fuck yeah.”

After two hours, Tim wasn’t back. Dick wasn’t overly concerned—at least, not more concerned that he had already been. It *was* Tim, to be fair. Just these past few days, they’d seen him get completely caught up in work. He could easily have gotten interested in something and lost track of time.

Four hours later, orange just starting to stain the sky, both Dick and

Jason were singing a different tune. Tim would be back before dark. He was a logical kid; he knew Batman would be out. He knew the risks that came with that. Unless he was in trouble.

But he wasn't in trouble. He wasn't.

Jason made dinner for them and put Tim's in the fridge. Neither of them acknowledged the anxiety rising.

At six hours, they did acknowledge it. Tim's watch couldn't be used as a tracker unless he activated the beacon. When they'd first discussed the panic buttons, the three of them had also talked about privacy. Tim, especially, was used to total freedom. He wasn't doing anything bad, but he wanted the freedom to be anonymous. Dick understood, so he'd been fine with it. Now, though, it was driving him insane.

Jason and Dick went out and split up, searching the streets for Tim. Then they looked on the rooftops. Nothing.

At eleven, they were suiting up, ready to go out and utilize their resources as Red Hood and Aegis, when Tim's panic button went off. Jason and Dick rushed to the computer, panic mixing with relief. Then they saw where he was, and everything was gone, replaced by horror.

The signal was coming from Arkham Asylum. Only one person would have been able to bring Tim there without his permission.

Bruce had gotten him.

Chapter 39: Little Bird, Please Let Me Go Home

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU START THE CHAPTER

TW for implied suicidal ideation

Okay, so this chapter has Tim in Arkham. I've been to the psych ward more than once. Both times included their fair share of trauma, and this chapter was influenced by that. That being said, this chapter also exaggerates some of the things that have been said. This isn't a description of every psych ward in existence. The ones I went to were vastly different. There are better ones, and there are worse. This is Arkham, so it's going to be terrible. I don't want this chapter to scare anyone away from going to an inpatient facility if they need it. If you feel like you need to go, chances are you do. If a therapist or psychiatrist wants you to go, you should definitely go. It won't be a vacation, but it'll keep you alive, and that's what's important.

Content Warning's for this chapter: psych wards, involuntary admission to a psych ward, mentions of suicidal ideation, mentions of self harm, mentions of substance abuse

They'd knocked him out the moment they grabbed him off the street. Damian must have told Bruce everything about the fight he and Tim had, because they didn't give him a moment to struggle. He'd woken up in a hospital room, with his arms handcuffed to the bed and a sizable lump on his head. They'd put him in a gown so big he was practically swimming in it. It had clearly been made as one size fits all, and the fabric scraped against his skin in a way that made him want to scream.

Almost as soon as he'd woken up, they'd come in to talk to him. A nurse, a doctor, and a uniformed security officer. All of them spoke to him with polite detachment. Well, not the officer. He stood silently in the back.

The doctor—Dr. Brooks, she told him, with a face so kind yet so empty of emotion—had explained the situation while the nurse took his vitals.

He was at Gotham General Hospital. Batman had brought him in to save him from himself. The name given was Timothy Gladwell—he even had all the papers to prove it. Wasn't that nice? Apparently, Batman had found Tim in an alley with a knife. Tim had expressed suicidal intent. When Batman tried to talk him down, Tim had become violent. Now, usually it wasn't allowed to hit mentally unstable individuals, but it was Batman, and he can't be expected to know every protocol, right? So Tim was brought here, and they'd gone ahead and taken a blood sample(Batman provided his parents' signatures of consent for anything they needed to do, he was so thoughtful), but they'd need a urine sample so when he was ready Max, who would be here soon, could take him to the bathroom to get it, but he should know that he wasn't allowed to close the door fully.

When they'd gotten him a psych evaluation—which may take a while as they didn't have actual psychiatrists in the ER, only social workers who were all very busy—they would decide if he needed to be transferred to an inpatient facility. As he'd been attempting suicide, he absolutely would be admitted, but the evaluation was still necessary.

Where's my stuff? Tim had asked, thinking of his panic button.

Unfortunately, you can't have any of your belongings as we don't know if you're hiding contraband on them. Dr. Brooks had been regretful, but it had all been fake. She was saying the words and feeding him the emotions necessary to keep him calm.

I need my things .

I'm sorry, but it's hospital protocol. Is there anything we could get you?

A coffee, please? Better to remain polite and convince them he was harmless. Especially after Bruce had dented that with his whole 'becoming violent argument'.

Ooh, a plastic grimace, *I'm sorry, but we can't give you caffeine as it's considered a drug, and not one you need. Anything else?*

Can you uncuff me?

Sure, Tim. But remember that if you show signs of violent intent, wither towards yourself or others, we may have to restrain you .

I understand.

They left him when the sitter arrived, Max. He sat with him for six

hours, during all of which Tim was lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. He did give them the urine sample. The whole time, he was worried someone was watching.

They gave him a pair of gray socks with grips on them so he wasn't walking barefoot. They were too big. Tim took them off.

There was dinner. They gave him a menu and told him he wasn't allowed to have utensils, so choose something he could eat with his hands. None of the food was something he could eat. He told Max he wasn't hungry, and he frowned.

Finally, a social worker came to see him. She sat down on the plastic chair across from the bed and looked at Tim with an expression of sympathy that seemed marginally more genuine than Dr. Brooks. Her name was Allison, and she was here to evaluate him.

Do you have any diagnoses?

No.

Are you on any medication?

No.

Do you smoke?

No.

Drink?

No.

Any illegal substances?

No.

Have you, in the past month, wished you were dead?

Yes.

Have you thought of how you would kill yourself?

No. Bruce may have told them his own cover story, but Tim wasn't going to play along. For his honesty, Allison pursed her lips and frowned at the clipboard.

Well. Alright, we'll move on. Have you ever wished to harm yourself?

Yes.

Have you done so?

No.

Have you wished to harm others?

No. Another frown, another note on the clipboard. *I wasn't trying to kill myself. Batman's lying.*

Oh? Well, what happened, then? Allison's voice was sympathetic, but she didn't believe him. Tim could see it in her eyes, the way she tilted her head. Designed to keep him talking, but she'd come to her own conclusion.

He lay back down. *Forget it. It doesn't matter.* Not like she'd believe the truth anyway. *Are you admitting me or not?*

In my opinion, you certainly should be. I'll submit my assessment, and after that, it'll be a search to find you a bed.

Allison had left. At nine, Max switched out with a guy named Simon. Night fell, and Tim couldn't sleep. Around four in the morning, he'd been handed melatonin and a paper cup of water. He took it, and didn't sleep.

Thirteen more hours passed before Dr. Brooks came back with 'good news'. There were, unfortunately, no beds available in a twenty mile radius at any of the adolescent units they typically sent patients to, but luckily, Arkham Asylum had a bed! Wasn't that lucky?

She had smiled at him, and the smile had said *agree with me* . But Tim was tired and empty, so he just shrugged. "Okay."

They made him sit in a wheelchair for the ride to the ambulance, then strapped him to the stretcher. When they got to Arkham, he had to sit in the wheelchair again as they wheeled him to the ward. *I can walk fine,* he'd told them, skin crawling at the loss of his autonomy.

We know , they said, with unyielding sympathy and practiced level-headedness, *but it's protocol.*

So Tim rode in the wheelchair.

There was an office. A lady in scrubs gave him three tests. Just from reading them, Tim could tell they were for depression, suicide, and anxiety. He answered honestly on all of them, and the nurse frowned. *You know, it's easiest to be honest,* she told him. Right. Because Batman had already told them everything, and who would they believe? The suicidal nutcase who'd attacked *the Batman* , or Batman himself?

His room was plastic. Plastic bed frame bolted to the ground, not against any wall, with a mattress three inches thick and white suffocation proof blankets that did nothing to block out the chill. Plastic shelves attached to the wall. A plastic chair, the only movable thing in the room, next to the plastic desk that was also bolted down. The door to the bathroom was foam with a magnet attached. Tim should only put it on the doorframe if he was showering.

He was not allowed to have toiletries in his room unless he was showering. The hospital provided baby shampoo, a toothbrush, and toothpaste. His family could bring him different ones if they visited.

Before leaving him alone, they did a strip test to document any injuries on him. They saw the cut on his leg, which had scarred. *Did you do that?*

No .

Then what happened?

Got mugged. They didn't believe him, but Tim didn't care much at this point anyway.

I want my things back.

You can't, unfortunately.

Then I want to see them. He had to get to his watch

Clearly, the nurse wasn't happy with him, but she bright him back out to the front desk, keeping a watchful eye on him all the while. She asked the security guard to get out his stuff. A few moments later, there it was. His hoodie, his shoes, his jeans--his watch. Tim reached out and grabbed it. *You can't have that.*

I just want to make sure it's not broken, he lied smoothly, double clicking the side button and dropping it back. *See? All done.*

The nurse brought him back to the room and asked if he needed anything else. He didn't. They gave him privacy, but only fifteen minutes of it before someone checked on him, a pattern which would repeat through the night.

Again, he didn't sleep.

Tim had been woken up by a tech coming to take his vitals. The man had asked him if he had any suicidal of self harming thoughts, then what his number for the day was. Tim told him six. The man raised his eyebrows. *Someone's feeling good* . He didn't say it like he was impressed. He said it like he knew Tim was lying but wanted to make him think he believed him.

Now, he was in his room. The tech had tried to get him to go out and join the group. *Talk to the other kids,* he said. *You have things in common* . Therapy, apparently, started in an hour or two, depending on whether or not the therapist actually arrived, because it was spotty with that apparently.

His door opened, and a man in a button down shirt and gray tie walked in. There was an ID card on a lanyard around his neck. When they brought him in, Tim had seen the places where an ID was required to access. The door to the ward, for example.

"Hey, Tim," the doctor said. "I'm Dr. Alberts. I'll be your psychiatrist while you're with us. I have a few questions to ask, if that's alright with you?"

It was not alright with Tim. But he'd learned by now that if he tried to refuse, the doctor would just twist his words around and around in an endless cycle of 'I hear what you're saying, but's, and he was too tired to deal with that. So he said no, he didn't mind.

It was not just a few questions. Tim felt he was being cut open and everything that twisted and hurt and ached inside him was being forced out into the open, ugly and writhing for Dr. Alberts to inspect with his polite voice and clinical words. When he was done, Tim had three new ones to describe himself: autism, depression, anxiety.

After all this time, his brothers had been wrong, and his parents had been right. There was something wrong with him.

No, Tim didn't want to go to group. No, Tim didn't want dinner. No,

Tim wasn't interested in melatonin to help him sleep.

The next day, they gave him a protein shake. "You aren't getting enough nutrients," the tech told him. "You've got to drink that."

"I don't want it."

"If you refuse to drink it, I'm going to have to make you."

Tim drank the protein shake.

As he figured they would, the techs made him go to the common area as well. It consisted of two plastic tables, covered in half-finished coloring sheets and word searches, and surrounded by plastic chairs like the one in Tim's room. Six kids sat there already, each in the same gown as Tim's.

"Hey," one of them said. "I'm Arson. You?" Arson had blond hair that looked like they'd cut it themself. Their hands and arms were covered in black marker drawings of bones, matching what would be under the skin in a cartoonish imitation.

"Tim," Tim said.

"What're your pronouns?"

"Oh—uh, he/ him." No one had ever asked Tim his pronouns before.

"Cool. Mine are they/ he."

"Awesome." Arson went back to writing in a black composition notebook with a pen that looked bendable. Hesitantly, Tim pulled out a chair a few seats away from him and sat down, folding his hands in his lap.

"I'm Sage," another kid said. "They/ them." They had bright red hair and the stubble of a beard that hadn't been shaved in a few days. Freckles covered their round face, and they smiled brightly at Tim. He offered a small one back. It probably looked weird. He wasn't feeling much of anything.

"Why're you here?" another kid asked. They had long brown hair dyed blue at the ends—it reminded him of Dick. Tim missed him—and light brown skin. They weren't being mean, just…curious. It was an open, honest question. More honest than any of the techs were.

"I…Lots of reasons, I guess." Tim looked down. He refused to say he

tried to kill himself. He wasn't going along with Bruce's bullshit. But he didn't know what to say. No one would believe the truth.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Sage said. Their expression was sincere. "You don't have to say anything you don't want to. And if we're saying stuff that triggers you, tell us and we'll stop."

Tim frowned in confusion. "What do you mean, triggers me?"

"Anything that…well, triggers you. If it makes you panic, or reminds you of trauma, or gives you super bad anxiety. That kind of thing. Lots of people are triggered by the usual things, suicide, self harm, substances. If you're gonna bring anything like that up, just use a trigger warning."

Tim nodded slowly. "Alright." No one had ever told him about that, either. Anytime something made him panic or uncomfortable, his parents had told him to tough it out. Tim had gotten used to shutting down whenever something came up.

Two of the other kids were asleep with their heads on the table. One had faded purple hair fanning out around their head, obscuring their face. One of their arms was extended, though. Purple stars had been drawn on it in marker, over and over until the skin beneath was invisible. Maybe that was the point. The other had brown hair buzzed so there was just fuzz growing over their head. They slept tensely, head pressed into their arms and shrunk into themself. One of their wrists was in a splint.

The last person was staring at the table with unfocused eyes. They had shoulder length black hair and gold-brown skin. An unfinished crossword puzzle sat in front of them. They had a pen, but it sat loose in their hand.

"That's Cass," Arson said. "She doesn't talk much, but she's fine. She'll come back in a little bit."

Tim had gotten lost in his head before. Cass looked a lot like Jason told Tim he did when he'd asked. So he nodded and went back to the conversation.

None of these kids were actually insane, much less criminally. They'd all been stuck here because everywhere else was full.

"They know that, but they still treat us like we're dangerous," Arson

said. “Not as much as where the actual criminals are—it’s pretty much just the adults. Just keep your hands where they can see them, don’t do sudden movements, all that shit. They really like the bootyjuice here.”

“Bootyjuice?”

“Sedatives,” Sage clarified.

“Oh,” Tim said, feeling a little like he was going to panic. “Okay.”

“You’ve just got to be nice,” Arson said. “The truth is that they don’t care about helping you. You get like thirty minutes of therapy a day here. You should just focus on convincing them you’re better so they’ll let you out.”

Tim was about to ask how long Arson had been there when the doors opened. Dr. Alberts walked through, beckoning to Tim. “Let’s chat.”

The nerves immediately came rushing back, accompanied by a metallic taste in Tim’s mouth that made him want to gag. He got up and followed Dr. Alberts back to his room, shuffling along like a ghost in the too-big scrubs.

As it turned out, Dr. Alberts wanted to talk about medication. He was going to start with just one, but there were three he hoped to start Tim on. They couldn’t give them to him all at once, so he’d probably be staying for a few weeks until they could get that sorted out. In the meantime, he suggested, Tim should make the most of his time. Join the groups. Work through some of his problems and start searching for their roots. *Be honest* .

After all, Batman had saved him. He’d stopped Tim from throwing his life away. Tim should make the most of his second chance, didn’t he think?

Oh. And of course, he couldn’t leave until his parents came to sign him out. But the Gladwells were being notified by Batman himself. Wasn’t that nice of him?

Chapter 40: Lost Bird, Fucking Pissed

Chapter Notes

No CW's for this chapter

There was going to be murder. And violence. So much violence. Jason was going to give the Joker a crowbar, then throw Bruce into a cell with him for an hour. Or maybe he'd explain Bruce's very *real* psychological issues and get *him* locked up, see how he liked it.

Jason and Dick had been scrambling for the past day to get their shit together. Their plan to break into Arkham hadn't been finished, but in school Jason had only ever studied for twenty minutes before deciding to wing it. It usually worked out, and he wasn't leaving Tim in there a second longer than was possible.

Neither of them had slept, but they were getting their supplies together. Tear gas, some minor explosives, weapons of choice, mask and rebreather for Tim…things were going to get very crazy very fast. Neither Jason nor Dick were good enough with computers to erase Tim from Arkham's system, but he could do it himself when they got him out.

Dick was on his fourth cup of coffee, furiously trying to find any record of Tim's location in Arkham. "They wouldn't put him with the adults, would they?"

"Depends on what Bruce told them. Does Arkham even have a teen unit?"

"Fuck if I know." Dick hit the desk with one hand. "There's nothing about him anywhere. He's vanished."

"I swear to god, I'm ripping Bruce's head off." Green had been in the edges of Jason's mind since he saw the beacon. He was barely holding it back. Murderous rage, while absolutely valid, would not help him stay rational enough to find Tim.

"I'll help," Dick muttered darkly.

"You two are even less effective without Drake."

Dick and Jason spun, holding up whatever they had in hand(Jason had a gun. Dick had a rolled up set of blueprints.). Standing by the

open window, Damian scowled at them. He wore the Robin costume minus the mask, but the **R** had been carefully cut off.

“Get. The fuck. Out,” Jason growled.

Damian scoffed. “You aren’t scary, Todd.”

In response, Jason clicked the safety off his gun. “If you had anything to do with this, I will kill you. I don’t give a fuck if you’re a toddler.” He did, actually. It still felt good, in the way doing something rashly immature feels good for about two seconds before the guilt sets in.

Damian’s voice went cold. “If that’s how you feel. But no, I didn’t have anything to do with this. Father did what he did alone.”

“Even the tracker at the museum?” Jason asked. Dick had been concerningly silent this entire time. When he chanced a glance in his brother’s direction, Jason saw a whole slurry of emotions on Dick’s face. *Yikes. Big brother instincts must suck* , he thought.

“I did help with that.” Damian bit the inside of his cheek. “I hadn’t… spoken to him. Yet.”

Oh. So he found out. Jason relaxed minutely, but kept the safety off.

“You asked him about Robin?” Dick asked. His voice was carefully blank, though he’d failed to hide the very obvious conflict in his expression.

Damian turned to him. For possibly the first time Jason had known him, genuine guilt passed over his features. “Yes. I wish to apologize for accepting the title, Grayson. I didn’t know about your family, or that the name was yours. If I had, I would never have done it.”

Clearly, Dick hadn’t expected such sincerity. To be honest, Jason hadn’t either. He was a little bit impressed. And proud. Just a little bit, but…

“It’s…fine,” Dick finally said. “You didn’t know.”

“That doesn’t make it fine, Dick,” Jason said, anger still hot beneath his skin. “It just means it wasn’t Damian’s fault. We can still be mad at Bruce.”

Dick snorted. “Oh, I know. Believe me, I’m still gonna rip his head off.”

“I have something that might help you,” Damian said. Jason perked up. Information from Damian would be invaluable. Not just because he was the closest thing to Batman’s confidant, but because he was observant. He had a knack for perception that couldn’t be taught.

Jason lowered his gun. “Yeah?” Between him and Damian, it was as good as an alliance.

Instantly, Damian straightened, face setting in what Jason called ‘report mode’. “Father signed him in under the surname Gladwell. The records are sealed, but of course he has copies.” He produced a thin manilla folder from somewhere in his cape. Like a piranha, Dick snatched it. Jason leaned over to see the contents as he flicked it open, eyes darting over the page.

There was Tim. He was in the adolescent unit—and woah, okay, Jason hadn’t realized how tense he was until he read that statement. Relief washed over him. The file included his room number, care team, and…wow, they’d diagnosed him already. Depression, anxiety, and autism. If they could ever convince Tim to go to therapy after this(*thanks a lot, Bruce*), this could actually be a helpful starting point.

“Is it enough?” Damian asked, breaking the silence. He shifted just slightly. To Dick, it may have just been movement for the sake of movement. To Jason, it betrayed that Damian had gotten personally invested. Interesting.

“Yeah, it’s good.” Surprisingly, Dick was the one to say it. *Oh, he’s definitely adopting him* .

“Yeah. Thanks, Dami.” The nickname was rare, something Jason had used only sparingly in their League days. After what Damian had just done for them, and knowing the anger it would cause from Bruce, Jason felt that it was deserved. “Was there anything else?”

It was a leading question. Of course there was something else.

Damian went back to standing straight, arms by his sides, making direct eye contact with Jason. That was how he looked when he wanted to ask Talia for a mission. She wasn’t a fan of sending him out to fight, but Ra’s had never objected. Still, all his assignments were vetted by her. Damian had to fight for every one.

“I want to help you. What my father did was wrong. As idiotic as Drake is—”

“Say that again, and you’re not getting anything,” Dick cut in harshly. Jason nodded his agreement.

Stunned, Damian stood still for a few moments before dipping his head. “Drake doesn’t deserve to be institutionalized. That was a mistake. I would like to remedy it.”

Jason looked at Dick, and Dick looked back. The message in his eyes was clear: *your call* . Jason knew Damian best. It was down to him to decide if they could trust him.

He looked at Damian for a long time, and decided.

“Alright.”

Chapter 41: Lonely Bird, Holy Jailbreak Batman Part One

Chapter Notes

It's time for shit to hit the fan! Things are getting close to the end, I think, and right now it's all boiling over.

(shockingly) no CW's for this chapter

Enjoy! :)

It was the fourth day since Tim's panic button went off. Every moment had been like a knife in Dick's side. Anger and panic prevailed over the blood in his veins, sending him into overdrive. They'd had Damian with them since the second day, and now they were ready.

Dick and Jason were suited up. Jason had a duffel of supplies they were bringing. Dick's utility belt had been stocked with significantly more explosives, plus a few canisters of fear gas that Damian had stolen from one of Scarecrow's stashes('I thought it would be useful').

"Grayson," Damian said. He was in a green hoodie and jeans they'd grabbed for him from the store(the only person whose clothes might have fit him would've been Tim, and no way were either of them giving their baby brother's clothes to his almost murderer. Dick may understand where Damian was coming from, but he wouldn't be getting forgiveness from any of them until Tim gave it first.). "Can I talk to you?"

Jason tilted his head in confusion, but Dick shrugged. "Sure." He followed Damian out of the monitor room and into the kitchen, where the kid turned to face him.

"About my outfit." Damian's face was dead serious. "I was not aware until I asked Bruce that those were your family's colors."

"I know you didn't, Damian," Dick said. "I'm not mad at you for what you couldn't have known."

"Regardless, they're yours. If you do not want me to, I won't wear them tonight. Or ever again."

Dick blinked. Did Damian really feel this bad? Of course, they *were* the

Flying Grayson's colors, and seeing a stranger in them felt like a bucket of cold water being poured over his head, but Dick hadn't expected Damian to care about that. They were important to Dick, yes, but they were also just clothes. He hadn't thought it would matter to anyone but him.

"Well," he said, stumbling over his words a little, "What else would you wear? We don't exactly have a wardrobe full of costumes."

"I'll find something," Damian said. "The idiots trying to imitate Father tend to start out with hoodies and dark pants. I can make that work until I get a new costume."

"Are you sure?" Dick asked. That costume was Damian's. Bruce had given it to him, and it had been wrong of him to do so, but it was still his. His first costume, the one everyone knew him with.

Damian's expression was steady. "I'm positive. After what Father did…I don't know that I want it very much anyway." His eyes turned towards the ground.

"Okay, come here." Sue him, Dick was weak. Wrapping an arm around Damian, he pulled him into a side hug. Damian stiffened, one hand going to his side. There was probably supposed to be a weapon there, but Jason had made him disarm himself as insurance(right now, the kitchen table was home for two katanas; three long knives; ten small daggers of varying size, but all wickedly sharp; and several small explosives).

A few moments later, Damian…didn't relax, exactly. It wasn't like Tim, who wasn't used to physical contact but craved it constantly. It was more like Damian just hadn't learned physical affection was a thing. He went back to standing normally, just hugged against Dick's side.

"Grayson, what are you doing."

"It's called a hug."

"I know what hugs are."

"Are you sure about that?"

Damian scowled and pulled away. "Yes, I do. They're just unprofessional and useless."

Dick pouted. “Seriously? Jay, he just told me hugs are useless,” he called.

Jason’s head poked out of the monitor room. He looked at Damian with an over-exaggerated offended expression. “Damian, you can’t tell Dick that hugs are useless. He needs them to survive.”

Damian crossed his arms. “That’s a terrible survival instinct.”

“I think you just haven’t had enough hugs.” To make his point, Dick reached out to give Damian another one. The boy ducked away and glowered at him.

“I’ll kill you,” he threatened.

“No you won’t,” Jason said, stepping fully out of the monitor room. While still light, his voice had taken on a slightly threatening note. He gave Damian a hard look, which he responded to by grumbling in an uncanny imitation of Bruce. “Get ready. We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

The joking air disappeared as quickly as it came, and Damian returned his attention to Dick. “Well? Have you made a decision?”

Maybe Dick should get over himself. Maybe he should understand that the costume mattered to Damian too, now. But…

“I know it’s your first costume, but my family’s colors still mean a lot to me. If you can find something else to wear that’ll work, I’d really appreciate it.”

Damian nodded. “Done.” He disappeared upstairs, likely to the bedroom they’d…not exactly lent him. It was where he put his clothes and slept. He hadn’t even gotten under the covers. Instead, he’d grabbed a blanket from the living room and slept fully clothed on top of the comforter.

He couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right, but Dick ignored it and returned to the monitor room. Arkham’s blueprints were up on the screen where Jason was studying them, double checking every last detail. Tim was in the adolescent wing on the west side of the building. The rest of it was for the considerably larger population of criminally insane adults. No matter where you were going, the entrance was the same, but from the lobby two halls led to the separate wings.

“Are you ready for this?” Dick asked. He began going through the duffel one more time, making sure everything was there. Bribes, mainly, all planned and prepared, but also extra weapons, first aid, and Tim’s third favorite hoodie.

Jason turned away from the screens and looked out the window. “‘Course I’m ready.” Neither of them mentioned what they all knew. The Joker was inside. To get to Tim, Jason would have to be the closest to his murderer that he’d been since…well, since he was murdered. They hadn’t expected to go this soon. He was supposed to have more time to prepare himself. Even though they weren’t going anywhere near the Joker(as long as nothing went wrong), it was still a lot.

“Good,” Dick said. Everything was where it needed to be. He zipped up the duffel and passed it to Jason. “We’re gonna get him back.”

“You bet your ass we will.” Jason shouldered the bag before grabbing his guns off the table. Checking to make sure they were loaded and the safety was on, he holstered them. The blue in his eyes began to turn just a little green. “And then we’ll make Bruce pay.”

“Absolutely.”

They were in the living room when Damian got down the stairs. He was in a black hoodie and the leggings from his Robin suit. His face was obscured by one of Dick’s spare dominos. On his waist, he had Dick’s spare utility belt(which he hadn’t asked permission to borrow). “Can I have my weapons back?” he asked Jason, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Yeah, yeah, hurry up.” Jason pulled his helmet on while Damian hurried to the table and began rearming himself, putting the katanas on his back rather than his waist(Dick’s utility belt didn’t have sheaths). “You’re riding with Dick, by the way.”

“Tt. I can drive myself.”

Jason snorted, adjusting the duffel on his shoulder. “Do you *have* something to drive?”

“…I will ride with Grayson.”

They reached Arkham Asylum just before midnight, right after the

guards changed shifts. Once they paid off the right people, they would have eight hours to get Tim. If everything went well, they'd be gone long before then.

Even though his outfit made him look like an elementary schooler playing dress up, Damian managed to cut an intimidating figure. He walked on Jason's right on their way in, back straight, one arm tensed in anticipation of drawing a weapon.

As soon as the shift change had finished, the three of them walked right through the front doors. The guards now on duty barely looked at them the first glance. The second had them on their feet, hands on their guns.

Jason took the lead, the picture of control as he stepped forward, hand on the duffel. Dick let him do the talking while trying his best to look menacing. "Listen up, everyone. We don't want any trouble. We're here for a friend of ours."

"Don't care. Get out," one of the guards said.

"Really? If you let us in, we're willing to help you out." Jason produced the first bundle of cash. The guards' eyes went to it like a moth spotting a flame. "See? This doesn't have to be difficult."

The guard who spoke earlier(probably the one in charge) took his hand away from his gun. "You know, I think you're right." He accepted the cash from Jason. As he counted it, he asked, "Who're you here for?"

"One of the kids in the adolescent unit," Jason said. "We just need you to let us in."

Concern flashed over the guard's face. He stopped counting the cash. "What do you want with the kid?" he asked warily. So he did have a conscience. Dick mentally clapped for him.

"He's a friend who's not supposed to be in here." Jason's voice turned dark. "Someone was trying to get to us through him."

The guard glanced back at Dick and Damian, weighing Jason's words and the money in his hand. "All right," he finally said. "You can go."

"Pleasure doing business." Jason tossed the other two guards their respective wads of cash. "Tell the people on the other end that there's more where that came from if they let us in," he called back as they

walked through the door as the guard buzzed it open.

“Those people have no loyalty,” Damian said in disgust once the door had closed behind them. “It took nothing for them to let us in.”

“Would you rather we had to fight them?” Jason asked. “Gotham’s full of shitty people, D.” *Not Robin* , Dick noticed. They were on a mission, but Jason hadn’t called him Robin. “It sucks, but as long as the ones who’re supposed to be good aren’t shit, we can make it work.”

To Dick’s surprise, Damian seemed to actually pay attention to Jason’s words, considering them. Jason had been his teacher once, if Dick remembered correctly. Maybe some of that respect was still there.

They got to the adolescent wing fine. The door needed an ID card to open it, but the head guard must have relayed Jason’s message, because it was already open. A security guard was waiting inside, brows raised expectantly. Jason handed over the money, and she left them alone.

Room 212 was the number Damian’s information had given them. The trio passed a dark common area with a table surrounded by plastic chairs and down the hall to the patient’s rooms. For a place meant to make people want to be alive, the whole area looked inexplicably lifeless. If Dick had been stuck here, he doubted he’d ever feel better.

Room 218, 217, 216, 215, 214…there. Near the end of the hall and another set of double doors was Room 212. The door was unlocked, with a half-circle handle that moved silently. Dick slowly pushed the door open, and there he was.

Tim was awake. He’d sat up in bed the moment he saw the door moving, and when he saw the people on the other side, he shot to his feet. “You came!” he whisper-yelled, a smile breaking across his face as he sprinted the distance towards them, hospital gown dragging against the floor—and stopped short when he saw Damian.

Dick rushed forward, putting himself between the two kids so Tim would feel safe. “It’s not what you think, baby bird,” he whispered. “He’s not with Batman. He wanted to pay us back by helping us find you. And,” he said, giving Damian a pointed look, “He’s *very, very* sorry for what he did to you.”

With only a small scowl, Damian nodded his agreement. Tim stared at him for a few moments, calculating, before he threw himself at Dick. Dick wrapped his arms tightly around his baby brother, sinking to his

knees so they were close to eye level.

“I missed you,” Tim whispered.

“We missed you too, baby bird,” Dick replied.

Jason joined the hug, pressing a kiss to the top of Tim’s head. “We missed you so much.”

They only got a few seconds of peace before a scream echoed through the walls, followed by several crashes. Alarms began to blare moments later. “Oh, you have got to be shitting me,” Jason said.

“What?” Dick asked, already dreading the answer.

“It’s another jailbreak.”

Dick stood swiftly, grabbing Tim’s hand. “Okay, time to go, everyone. Field trip’s over.”

The four of them ran out to the common area, washed in a red glow from the emergency lights. None of the other kids had left their rooms.

Tim followed willingly until they went for the hall leading back outside. He stopped, pulling on Dick’s wrist. “The adult’s side is through there,” he said, pointing to a windowless door on the left wall.

“Exactly,” Dick said, “which is why we’re going this way.”

He started forward again, only to stop when Tim didn’t move. “But what about the Joker?”

“We aren’t here for him, we’re here for you,” Jason said. “We got you, and now we’ve got to *go.* ”

Again, Tim refused to move. “But if we don’t get him now, the plan’ll be screwed for months! After a breakout, they tighten security. We’ll have to either make a whole new plan, or wait for things to calm down again. Who knows how much will change before then?”

“He’s right,” Damian said. He didn’t question the fact that the people he’d chosen to help were apparently planning the Joker’s murder. “I’ve studied the patterns. If you don’t do it tonight, you won’t get another chance for a while.”

Dick looked to Jason. He had the most to gain or lose from this situation. They all wanted the Joker dead, but Jason was the one he'd hurt the most. It was his vengeance. His call.

Jason met his eyes through the helmet. Dick could imagine the change in his eyes, shifting the storm-cloud blue to mossy green. He drew one of his guns and clicked the safety off.

"Let's go."

Chapter 42: Lonely Bird, Holy Jailbreak Batman Part Two

Chapter Notes

> EVERYTHING'S HAPPENING IN THIS ONE. I've been thinking about this moment since I started the fic, and now it's finally here. A thousand words longer than most other chapters, and I'm super proud of it.
>
> Content Warnings for this chapter: death, violence, blood, bad parents
>
> Enjoy! :)

The adult's side of Arkham was pandemonium. Uniformed bodies littered the ground, bloody, beaten, and dead. The inmates were streaming towards the exit with a few notable faces standing out.

Two Face was near the back of the crowd. He rifled through a guard's pocket and arose victorious with a coin clutched in his hand. With an expression of apprehensive glee, he flipped it. The result must have been what he wanted, because he let out a whoop and ran for the door.

Scarecrow danced among the bodies, laughing as he picked pockets for keys and valuables. The time locked up hadn't done him any good, lack of sunlight leaving him sallow and gaunt, not to mention no less insane. He didn't even notice the group as they traveled through the main corridor.

Dick itched to stop them and return them to their cells, but they needed to find the Joker. He wouldn't be rushing out with the crowd. Every time Batman caught him, Joker was shipped back to Arkham in that obnoxious purple suit, and he always broke out in it too. No way would he be able to keep it while he was in the Asylum, so obviously he had to get it back from somewhere.

"We need to find wherever they keep the inmates' things," Dick said.

"It's that way," replied Tim. When the other three gave him confused looks, he shrugged. "They didn't let me keep my watch. How else was I going to contact you?"

Jason grinned and ruffled Tim's hair. Spluttering, Tim ducked away, but he couldn't hide the tiny smile sitting proudly on his face. "Baby bird, you're fucking brilliant. Lead the way."

Away from the main holding area, down a hall, and two right turns brought them to a room that connected once again to both wings. Clearly, it was the security desk, judging by the monitors filled with camera footage, more than half of which were currently out of commission.

"It's through there," Tim said, gesturing to the door behind the desk. Jason took the lead position once again, raising his gun and clicking the safety off as he headed for the door. Without realizing he was doing it, Dick stepped in front of Tim and Damian. The latter scoffed as he drew his katana.

And *oh, shit, Tim was unarmed* .

"Jason," Dick hissed. His brother glanced back, expression a clear *what the fuck is important enough to interrupt this moment.* "Give me the bag."

Frowning, Jason briefly lowered his weapon to shrug the bag off his shoulder, tossing it to Dick. Dick caught it and fished inside, emerging with a collapsible bo. "Here, Timmy," he whispered, passing it over. Tim grabbed onto it like the staff was a beloved possession that he hadn't seen in years. In less than a second, it was snapped open and right at home in Tim's hands. Dick nodded at Jason. "Ready."

Jason nodded back. His helmet was still on, but apprehension was written in the tensity of his body, the half second's hesitation before he lifted his gun once more and wrenched the door open. The four of them surged in, ready for anything.

The Joker was rifling through a bin of items, a telltale piece of purple fabric revealing that it was his. When the door opened, he turned to face them.

Even without the makeup, his face was milky pale. His lips were red not with makeup, but with blood from being constantly bitten. The Joker shook slightly, but he smiled wide as he straightened up, orange clothes hanging loose over his frame.

"Well, well, well, gentlemen! To what do I owe the pleasure of this little visit? Usually no one cares if I'm *in* the madhouse," the Joker said, voice grating in an announcer's showy boom. "If you want

autographs, I'm sure I can make the time."

Damian let out a disgusted noise, but Dick noticed the way Jason had frozen, gun aimed at the Joker's chest, but barely moving enough to breathe. He stepped forward, letting their shoulders just barely brush. Not enough for the Joker to see the connection, but enough for Jason to know that Dick was there, and he wasn't leaving.

"Hate to break it to ya, pal, but we're not here for an autograph," Dick said, automatically going for his usual cheer.

The Joker's gaze darted around each of them, from Jason's gun to Dick's escrima sticks, then Damian's sword and Tim's bo. "Ah. Looking for a job, perhaps? I do have plenty of ideas in the old noggin, but you'll have to forgive me. I need a few hours to stretch my legs before I can really settle into a good scheme."

"Not here for that, either," Dick said.

The Joker frowned at that. Rocking back on his heels, he pressed a finger to his lips, sizing the four of them up. Then, his manic grin returned. "Well, I must confess, you've got me stumped. What is it, then?"

"We're here to kill you," Damian said, harsh and honest. At least Dick didn't have to say it.

His words drew the Joker's attention to him. He tilted his head, leering at Damian. "Is that so, pumpkin?" he asked, eyes dragging from Damian's sword to his eyes, narrowed in hatred. At his side, Jason flinched. And the Joker noticed.

"Oh," he said, and then he laughed. It was long and loud, assaulting the group's ears as he threw his head back and *cackled* , clutching his sides. It took several minutes for him to collect himself before he straightened back up, wiping a tear from his eye. "Oh, is this revenge? Do I know you from somewhere?" he asked Jason, stepping closer with a malevolently inquisitive gleam in his eyes. His expression turned mockingly sad, all exaggerated puppy eyes and pouty lips. "Did I upset you?"

Jason readjusted his grip on the gun, still speechless. Tim stepped up on his other side, bo held up threateningly. "It doesn't matter what you did," he said, glaring in a way that was shockingly intimidating for an undersized thirteen year old in a hospital gown. "We're just here to get even."

Again, the Joker laughed. “Really? You sure you don’t actually want to have a little fun?” He took a step towards Tim, and Dick moved. In one stride, he was there, putting all his strength into slamming an escrima stick into the Joker’s gut.

The Joker stumbled back with a wheeze. Predictably, it turned into a laugh as he clutched his stomach, panting with the effort to force air back into his lungs. “Well,” he choked out, “That was certainly exciting.”

“There’s a lot more where that came from,” Damian threatened, stepping forward with his sword aimed towards the Joker’s throat.

“And we’ve got all the time in the world,” Jason added. His voice was hoarse and weak as he stepped forward, gun aimed at the Joker’s foot. “Your fellow psychos cleared out the prison for us.”

The Joker looked up, frowning sarcastically. “Now, that’s not fair,” he said. “We aren’t all psychos. There’s a broad spectrum of psychological disorders, but you people always categorize us—”

“Oh, shut up.” Tim knocked his feet out from under him with a swift blow from his staff. The Joker hit the ground hard, losing his breath again. “You don’t get to play with us anymore. This is the end of the line.”

For a moment, the Joker’s eyes narrowed as he gazed up at Tim, poison sharpening his stare. Then his head fell back and he began to laugh again.

“What’s so funny?” Jason asked. When the Joker didn’t respond, he shot the ground near his leg. “ *What are you laughing at?”*

The Joker rolled onto his side, mouth stretched into a smile too wide to be ordinary, staring at the door. “You kids—” he broke off into another round of giggles. “—You kids are very determined, I’ll give you that. But you’re forgetting something.”

“What’s that?” Jason growled.

“You’re small birds in this city, kiddos.” Lifting one hand, the Joker pointed at the door. “But the Bat’s a good deal bigger.”

Oh, fucking shit nuggets.

The four of them turned. There, in the doorway, stood Bruce in his full

Batman regalia. He glowered at them all. “You three, I’m giving you one last opportunity. Leave this all behind. Stop going down this path. I showed you what’ll happen if you don’t listen. This is your last warning. Robin, come back. We need to have a conversation.”

“We already had a conversation, Father.” Damian scowled, moving to stand beside Dick. “You are not the man I thought you were. These people are much better than you ever were.”

Everyone ignored the Joker’s gleeful, *‘Father?’*.

Bruce glared, but turned to Dick. “Dick. You know this is wrong. You always cared so much about other people. Why are you letting him—” he gestured to Jason, still between Tim and Dick “—persuade you to do these things? I always believed in you, son. That’s why I gave Robin that name. To honor you.”

“Oh, jesus christ, *shut up* !” Dick yelled. “Is that seriously what you’re going for? ‘I wanted to honor you’? You’re not even bothering to hide my identity. What, you want to help him beat another of your kids to death?” The Joker asked something, but it was lost in the blood roaring in Dick’s ears.

“You left us to die in that house.”

“I knew you could make it out. The three of you were always strong, always resourceful—”

“Then why did you get rid of us?” Dick screamed. Tears were pricking at the corners of his eyes and screw everything Jason said, he was not going to let Bruce see him cry. “Why weren’t we good enough to keep? You adopted me, you made the Manor Hood and Specter’s home, you said you *loved us!* That we were your sons! If we were so strong, so ‘resourceful’, why didn’t you tell us the truth? We would have fought for you. We would have done *anything* for you.”

Bruce grit his teeth. “It was too dangerous to tell you anything. If you’d known, you would have been targets. I was trying to keep you safe.”

A derisive laugh ripped itself from Dick’s throat. “Oh, yeah. So you left us in the Manor while it burned! Good job there, keeping us safe. Solid plan. And, what, it wasn’t okay for us to help, but it was fine for a nine year old?” He looked over at Damian, who was staring at Bruce with something resembling horror. “He’s a kid too, B. What makes him different?”

“He’s been trained—”

“—And he’s *still* a *child* ,” Tim cut him off, voice shaking with fury. “It doesn’t matter if he’s been trained. He deserves to be safe too.”

“This is so heartwarming!” The Joker cried, clapping from where he still lay on the floor. “Brothers standing up against their absent father. Batsy, you never told me you had kids before. We could have had such fun!”

He shrieked abruptly when Jason shot him in the leg. “You did have fun,” he said. “That’s why we’re doing this.”

Apparently, that was the last straw for Bruce. Faster than the kids could react, he crossed the room, knocking them all back with quick, precise attacks so he was standing over the Joker while the four of them were against the back wall. Suddenly, Dick and the others found themselves on the defensive. Jason shifted his gun to aim at Batman, while the three others lifted their respective weapons.

“Hood, lower your gun,” Bruce said, “Or I’m taking you in.”

Jason snorted. “Hood. Is that how you want this to go? You call Dick by his name, but you don’t want to admit just who you’re screwing over.” He reached up and yanked his helmet off, revealing his face, covered only by the domino. “What’s the matter, Bruce? Don’t want to accept that it’s really me?”

“Ooh, Bruce?” The Joker repeated. “Now, why does that sound familiar.”

Batman ignored him. “Fine. *Jason* . Stand down.”

“No.”

“I’m serious, Jason. This is your last chance. I’ve tried to tell you, but if you refuse to listen, I *will* put you down.”

“See you keep saying that,” Jason said, “But we both know you’d never kill anyone. If you would, you wouldn’t be going to such lengths to protect *his* sorry ass. You just have to make me scared that you’ll kill me. Guess what, B? I’m not afraid of you.” He lifted his gun. This time, it was aimed at the Joker’s head.

“Jason,” Bruce said.

“Go on, *Batman* , if you’re so genuine. It’s him or me.” Jason smirked, but unease rolled through Dick’s gut. He didn’t like this.

Jason clicked the safety off his gun. Bruce made a warning sound.

Jason adjusted his aim. Bruce tensed.

Jason put his finger on the trigger. Bruce attacked.

None of them could stop the batarang as it arced through the air. In the split second as it passed them, Dick let himself think that Bruce had missed. But then Jason stumbled back three steps and collapsed, blood streaming from his neck.

Tim darted to Jason’s side, grabbing the duffel and rifling through for first aid. Dick and Damian charged at Bruce.

There was no method to Dick’s attacks. He was a thing of pure rage, made only the more powerful by his escrima sticks as they became extensions of himself, tools in the vengeance every part of him demanded. His entire being screamed for Bruce to pay for what he had just done.

Damian was more calculated. Face set in cold anger, he slashed and parried and hacked away as Bruce was forced to defend himself against the onslaught of attacks, incapable of getting an offensive move in through the power of Dick and Damian’s fury.

“How—fucking—dare you!” Dick bellowed, each word punctuated by a punch or a kick, forcing Bruce backwards, step after miniscule step. “You fucking hypocrite! You liar! You absolute goddamn fraud of a hero!”

“I am doing what’s right!” Bruce roared back, still fighting strong despite the two boys’ efforts. “You’ve let your emotions blind you to the reality of this world! If you begin killing, you become just as bad as him!”

“No we *don’t* !” Dick brought one escrima cracking against Bruce’s jaw, the one part of him not completely encased in armor. Bruce yelled in pain, falling back another few steps. “Don’t you see him? He *enjoys* it, Bruce. It’s a game to him. It’s not a game to any of us. It’s a necessary step, and if you weren’t so fucking obsessed with your own morality, you’d see that!”

“My morality is what separates me from them!”

“Your morality made you just as bad as them when you chose it over your own family!”

Damian got a lucky hit on a chink in Bruce’s armor, slashing a deep cut through his calf. He stumbled, and Dick knocked his legs out from under him. Bruce went down hard and sprang back up just as quickly. But in the time before he got up, Dick caught a glimpse of purple fabric, clutched in the Joker’s hand as he made a break for the exit.

“No!” Dick cried, going to dodge around Bruce. A gunshot stopped him in his tracks.

Everyone watched in perfect silence as the Joker crumpled, suit falling from his hand. He hit the floor with a crack, head smacking against the tile. Blood began to pool, and his face turned towards them. His eyes were glassy. There was a round hole in the middle of his forehead.

Bruce, Dick, and Damian turned to the back of the room. Tim was on one knee, holding Jason’s gun with both hands. His grip was steady, but his eyes were wide, tears still slipping down his face. Next to him, Jason lay unconscious, a bandage wrapped around his neck.

“I…” Bruce said.

Tim tore his gaze away from the Joker’s body and looked at Bruce, glaring fiercely. “Take one fucking step near us and I’ll shoot you too.”

For a long minute, Bruce stared at him, weighing his options. Then he disappeared, melting away into the shadows. Tim dropped the gun as his hands began to shake. Without a moment’s hesitation, Dick rushed towards him and scooped him up in a hug, one hand on the back of Tim’s neck to guide his face against Dick’s shoulder, stopping him from looking at the body. Tim’s entire body was shaking now.

“It’s alright, baby bird,” Dick murmured, rubbing Tim’s back. “It’s alright. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

Tim didn’t respond. He just kept shaking in Dick’s arms. Damian went to check on Jason, nodding in satisfaction when the bandages appeared to be up to his standards. “He’ll be alright,” he said. “But we need to leave.”

“You’re right,” Dick agreed. “Fuck. Jason’ll have to ride in the side car.” Even if his brother woke up fully conscious and walking, no way

was Dick letting him drive after everything that just happened. But he also had two young kids the he needed to get home safe, and both motorcycles had to get home so there was nothing physically connecting them to Arkham tonight.

“I can drive,” Damian said. “It’ll be fine.”

Dick stared at him. “You can drive.”

“Of course.” Damian cracked a smile, uncharacteristically hesitant. “A former assassin has to have some interesting skills, don’t you think?”

Dick didn’t have the emotional energy to process that Damian had just made a joke. “Okay,” he said, and pulled away from the hug to look Tim in the eyes. “Alright, Spec, we’re going home. One of your hoodies is in the bag. You can go ahead and put it on if you want. You’re gonna ride behind me, and we’re gonna put Hood in the sidecar, alright?”

Tim nodded and got the hoodie from the duffel. He’d gone nonverbal again, but Dick had kind of expected that. This wasn’t exactly a comforting scenario. While Dick lifted Jason into his arms bridal style, Tim went to the bins and began searching. It only took a few minutes for him to find what he was looking for, grabbing his clothes, shoes, and watch out of one labeled *Timothy Gladwell-212* . He shoved them in the duffel and shouldered it without a word.

Dick started for the door, but there was one last surprise for them before the night ended. The three conscious boys jumped when a vent cover clattered to the ground behind them, and a petite girl with chin length black hair dropped lightly to the ground.

Tim’s face lit up. He hurried forward and high-fived her, leaving Dick perplexed.

“Specter? Do you know who this is?” he asked. Tim nodded enthusiastically. “Is there any way you can tell me who she is?”

Tim tilted his head, frowning as he thought. Then he rushed out the door to the security desk. Grabbing a pen and paper, he hurriedly scrawled the words *Cass* , and, *friend* .

“Oh. Okay,” Dick said, like that explained a girl appearing from the vents. Cass smiled at him and signed something. “Oh, shit. I’m so sorry, I can’t sign.”

Cass was in the middle of a shrug Dick hoped was understanding when Damian piped up, “She said they were in the psych ward together.”

Surprised, Dick turned to him. “You speak sign language?”

“I know twenty seven languages,” Damian replied, as though Dick assuming anything less was an insult. “That includes American, British, and Atlantean Sign Language.”

Dick nodded slowly. “Oh. That makes sense. Okay, yeah.” He turned back to Cass. “Did Bruce put you there, too? Is there something we can do to help?”

Cas replied through sign language again, and Damian translated. “Bruce did put her there. She was on a mission her mother sent her on, and he caught her. When she met the other kids, she decided she wanted to stay. Also, she’d like to leave with us.” There was recognition in his voice, and Dick would definitely be bringing that up later.

Internally, Dick cursed Bruce for once again being such a shithead. Externally, he smiled. “Are you alright with riding behind Damian?”

Cass grinned and nodded.

Four now five, they pushed ten miles over the speed limit, Damian and Cass on Jason’s bike, Dick, Jason, and Tim on the second. Jason’s head lolled against the seat. When they got back to the penthouse, they’d need to take a closer look at his injury.

Bruce was still a threat. Dick couldn’t let himself forget that. But for now…the Joker was dead. They had Tim back. Damian, it seemed, had chosen a side. And Cass was there. He wasn’t sure what exactly her presence would mean for them, but he was already protective of her. These people were under his protection now, but they were also his team. And together, they would figure it out.

Chapter 43: Little Bird, What Comes After

Chapter Notes

> This is gonna be the last chapter. I thought it was going to take me a few more to get everything wrapped up, but then it all kind of came together in this one. So, yeah.
>
> No CW's for this chapter.
>
> Enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hi, Tim. I’m Alex, and my pronouns are she/ they. It’s really nice to meet you.” The person on the other end of the screen smiled at him. She was white, with freckles and big green eyes. Overall, she seemed very normal.

Tim pressed closer against Dick’s side. He hadn’t wanted to do this, not really. But Dick and Jason had asked, and they’d done everything in their power to make it comfortable for him. And, ultimately, Tim had known that eventually they’d drop it if he really wanted them to. So he said yes.

“Nice to meet you,” he replied, barely loud enough to be audible.

Alex clearly noticed. She sat forward a little, expression softening. “It’s totally fine if you’re nervous,” they said. “Something I want to let you know is that you’re free to refuse to answer anything I ask. Anything you do say is completely confidential, unless you’re putting yourself or others in danger. And your brother can stay with you as long as you’re comfortable.”

Tim nodded.

“Now, one thing,” Alex said, turning to Dick. “I understand you’re Tim’s legal guardian? And by the way, Tim, what are your pronouns?”

“He/ him,” Tim replied, while Dick nodded in answer to Alex’s question.

The Drakes were dead. They hadn’t acted fast enough to stop the

Obeah Man, as they learned he was called, from sacrificing them. Not just that, but he'd gotten away.

For all the attention that went to their deaths, very little was paid to the fate of Jack and Janet's son. Social services came to take him, but Tim was waiting at Drake Manor with printed proof that Michael Donaldson(who bore a striking resemblance to Dick Grayson) was his uncle and next of kin, and was fully willing to adopt him. Within twenty four hours, Dick was his legal guardian, and soon after, they left Gotham behind.

"As Tim's legal guardian, I do just have to make sure I have your consent to provide therapy," Alex said. "But of course, Tim, remember that your consent matters just as much here." Tim nodded slightly again.

"I consent," Dick said.

"Great. Well, Tim, do you want to tell me a little about yourself?"

Which part? I'm thirteen, I killed a man three weeks ago, and my parents died a day later. Tim had to force back a sardonic smile. There was so much he could say, and so much he knew wasn't safe to do so.

He held on to Dick's arm a little tighter. "My favorite color is green."

Alex smiled. It wasn't like the people in the psych ward, all lies and placation and bullshit. It was just a smile. "That's cool. Mine's yellow. Anything else? Maybe hobbies you like, or siblings?"

"Oh, I've got three brothers," Tim said. "And a sister."

"Would you like to tell me about them?"

Jason had taken a day to wake up. They hadn't had to stitch the wound, thank fuck—none of them knew how still, though Tim would be willing to bet Damian did. It wasn't long before he was recovered enough to sit up and all that, though Dick firmly refused to let him get up for at least three days. Jason had tried to pull the whole 'I've had worse thing' again, but Dick wasn't going for it. So for three days, they'd gotten to witness a cranky, bedridden Jason. It was enough for Tim to hope he never got injured again(even though he already

wished that. He just wished it for a more selfish reason now.).

Sometime during those three days—that time all blurred together a bit in Tim's memories now—they had gathered in Jason's room to have the conversation they all needed to have.

"So," Jason had said, looking straight at Damian. "You tried to kill Tim." Cass, who hadn't known that, twisted to look at Damian, glaring fiercely. "Is there anything you want to say about that?"

Shockingly, Damian turned to Tim with little hesitation. "Drake, I'm sorry. I did what I did because of my loyalty to Batman. Now that I realize that loyalty was misplaced, I also realize that what I did was horrible. I wouldn't expect you to forgive me, but I want you to know that I regret it. What you did at Arkham was incredibly brave."

Tim never in a million years thought that a nine year old would make him feel proud of himself. Especially not this nine year old. All he could do was nod back, acknowledging Damian's words.

"Alright," Dick said. "Now. That being said. Tim, it's your decision what we do now. Jason and I already spoke to Damian, and he understands that you probably don't feel comfortable near him. If that's the case, we already have a safe place for him to stay. But, given how he's helped us, and the fact that Jason knew him before, we thought we'd also make it an option for him to stay here. But that choice is entirely up to you."

Oh.

If Tim was completely honest with himself, he'd never really been scared of Damian. He was a little kid. An incredibly deadly kid who wasn't to be taken lightly, yes, but a kid. The idea that he was a bloodthirsty killer never sunk in.

Now, especially, knowing how he'd changed…Damian had heard what Jason said to him on the rooftop all those weeks ago, and he'd taken it to heart. When he heard what Bruce did, he denounced him. He'd fought by their side at Arkham, and he'd chosen who he stood with.

Tim knew what it felt like to do everything you could think of to make your parents happy. He remembered years of pushing down every fear and every twitch, going hungry when there was nothing he could eat and wearing himself out being social at galas.

Damian wasn't really all that different. He was a kid just trying to fit

in the world he found himself in, and was just now realizing that he hadn't gotten everything right.

"Damian," he said. Damian returned his gaze, green eyes steady and unflinching. He was ready for whatever Tim said next. "I'm not sure if I forgive you. I'm not sure when I will."

Already, Damian was dipping his head. "I understand—"

"I'm not done. I don't know if I forgive you. But I understand why you did what you did. If you want to stay with us, that's fine by me."

Damian looked up, eyes wide. He looked at Tim with something a little like awe. It struck Tim that maybe he'd never had someone present the world to him in a way that wasn't black and white. "If you're sure…" Tim nodded. "I would like to stay as well."

Two weeks later, they decided they needed a new start. The penthouse was too insecure since Bruce knew where it was, and none of them were particularly interested in staying in Gotham anyway. So, they'd gone to Bludhaven.

They'd found a townhouse with five bedrooms, easily affordable thanks to Jason's crime lord side hustle and Tim's new inheritance. He wasn't interested much in what he should do with it at the moment, but helping to support the family definitely seemed like a good idea.

Dick and Cass's rooms were on the top floor, where a balcony provided easy access to the roof. Tim pretended that he didn't hear them going out, sometimes alone, sometimes, together, sometimes with Damian involved too. He knew they would always come back.

Tim, Jason, and Damian all resided on the first floor. Tim's room was closest to the living room and the router, all the better reason for him to spend more time near the others. Jason's was next to the kitchen. Since they'd moved, he'd begun to teach the three younger kids to cook(Dick was banned from the kitchen after he set a box of cereal on fire). Damian, of course, was closest to the basement, where they'd set up a training area along with their control center.

If people looked closely, they may notice that Red Hood and Aegis had left Gotham at the same time as that odd family arrived in Bludhaven. They may also have noticed that Robin disappeared, but Mockingbird had joined the vigilante duo when they relocated.

Fortunately for them, Tim had wiped away all traces of their life in Gotham and planted an entire new one in Bludhaven. No matter what people thought, they'd never find anything to prove it.

"One thing I'd like to touch on briefly is your parents," Alex said. "You mentioned in your first email that they passed away recently. I heard about it on the news, and I wanted to say how sorry I am for your loss. Is there anything you'd like to talk about regarding that?"

Tim leaned closer to Dick. While he'd been explaining his family, he'd gotten comfortable, beginning to adjust to Alex and her questions, but he recoiled from his parents.

"I don't know," he said shortly. "They weren't around much."

Alex's eyebrows lifted, but she said nothing. "That's alright. We can always talk about it another time. But maybe you could try to think about it a little before our next session?"

"Sure."

"Awesome."

The session ended after forty five minutes, like they'd paid for. When they closed the laptop, Dick turned to Tim. "Well, baby bird, what did you think?"

Tim was silent for a little bit before answering. "She seemed nice."

"Are you sure? Because I know you have a hard time with it, but you don't have to stick with her. We'll all be here for you for as long as it takes to find someone you like, and we'll be there after, too."

"I know, Dick." Tim smiled. The anxious look on his oldest brother's face was endearing, though a little worrying. "I promise. She seems nice. I want another session.

"Really?" A smile broke out over Dick's face. "That's great, Timmy."

Cass appeared in the doorway from the kitchen. *How was it?* She signed. Damian had been teaching them all sign language so they could communicate better. It turned out Jason knew ASL as well. Dick and Tim were picking it up fast.

“It was good,” Tim said. “Did you help Jason with the cookies like you said?”

It was redundant. The smell of chocolate and sugar wafted in from the other room, where a timer had rung out a few minutes before. Still, Cass nodded and beckoned for them to follow her.

“Hey, Timmy! How’d it go?” Jason asked, ruffling Tim’s hair as he passed. Tim ducked away, snagging a cookie off the cooling rack. “Hey! Give that back!” Tim giggled so hard he nearly spit out the massive bite he took, prompting Jason to hurry over and grab him around the middle, hoisting him into the air. “Oh, Dami, I think Tim wants to spar!”

Oh, shit. Rapidly swallowing the bite, Tim gasped out, “No, I do *not* want to spar,” at the same time as Damian appeared at the bottom of the stairs.

He was in black shorts and a black t-shirt, breathing hard with both his hands wrapped up. A lot of his time was spent training at the moment, but Dick had brought up enrolling him in school. Personally, Tim thought that was a punishment to the other kids, and Damian was adamantly against the idea too.

“What’s wrong, Drake?” Damian asked smugly. “Scared to fight?”

“I’m not ‘scared to fight’. I just don’t want you to bite my fucking arm again!” Tim squawked, shrieking when Jason let him go without warning. He dropped and rolled to his feet, shooting a glare at his big brother.

“Language!” Dick called. He’d picked it up again now that they had a small child with them who didn't seem to know swear words yet. Tim thought Damian did know swear words, but prided himself on not using them.

Fuck , Cass signed. Dick made an offended sound as she grinned, holding two cookies that Jason hadn’t noticed were missing yet.

Cass, they’d learned, was fourteen. She was Lady Shiva’s daughter, which was where Damian knew her from. He’d had some interesting stories to share, about a girl raised with her vocal cords cut so that her only language would be violence.

Clearly, it didn’t take. Cass was certainly a skilled fighter—she could beat Jason and hardly break a sweat—, but she wasn’t interested in

the whole vigilante business. In fact, she actually seemed quite interested in going to school.

“Come on Timmy, go spar with Damian,” Jason said, grinning sinisterly as he turned towards Tim.

“ *No* .” Stealing another cookie, Tim spun and ran away. Jason chased after him, and their yells stirred up enough commotion that Tim worried they’d get a noise complaint.

Jason caught him eventually, and Tim was dragged back to the kitchen a la sack of potatoes, only this time, he got dunked into a chair. “No more cookies,” Jason said sternly, though his smile still stretched from ear to ear. “These are for *tomorrow* , to celebrate Dickiebird’s first day of school.”

Dick flushed, even as Damian, who was now upstairs, asked, “Then why didn’t you make them tomorrow?”

Jason had talked him into applying to Bludhaven University. Unsurprisingly, because Dick was actually incredibly smart and talented, he got in. Tomorrow was his first day of classes working towards a degree in Sports Medicine. Everyone had been talking about it for the past few days, mostly to annoy Dick.

Tim grinned, looking at them all. Jason, slinging an arm around Dick’s shoulders as he tried to laugh off the praise. Cass, on her fourth unnoticed cookie. Damian, trying to sneak past Jason’s octopus arms to steal one of his own.

Months ago, Tim had remembered what it was like to have a Family. Capitol F. Now, he had one again. They were all traumatized, probably unstable individuals, who made questionable choices about how they spent their time; but they were each other’s questionably unstable individuals, and that was what mattered.

They were Family. And this time, Tim wasn’t scared that it would all fade into a memory.

Chapter End Notes

> For anyone who's curious, a mockingbird is an aggressive bird that'll make its home anywhere because its so confident in its ability to defend it.
>
> Thank you all so much for reading! I never expected this fic to get

as popular as it did, and I'm so grateful to everyone for all the kudos and comments. They've all made my day every time I see them. I'm going to try and keep up this streak of writing everyday for as long as I can, so tomorrow I'm going to start a birdflash fic my friend's been asking me to write! You can check my account then if you want to read it!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!